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STORY MAGAZINE

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big new Novel of Longhorn Thunder

by LES SAVAGE JR.

The LAST RIDE OF POTHOOKS MARRS

"TEXAS SPAWNS A WILD-GUN BREED"

A Shootout Novelet by ROBT. PENNINGTON

Anderson

Missing Page

Inside front cover

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President
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A Complete Booklength Western Novel

THE LAST RIDE OF POTHOOKS MARRS . . . . . **Les Savage, Jr.** **78**
Is the width of the Texas plains, or the winding length of the dusty Chisholm Trail big enough to hide the stinkin' backtrail of a drygulcher? One thought so . . . he was Pothooks Marrs . . . sweet target-bait for the King Colts parade.

Two Big Rangeland Novelets

TEXAS SPAWNS A WILD-GUN BREED . . . . . **Robt. Pennington** **4**
Untiring as a bloodhound with the scent, young Fowler trailed Black Battersee from Texas to Colorado. And he swore before lawman and hardcase alike that the showdown would be the wildest bullet-fiesta this side of hell.

RUSTLERS' BRAND . . . . . **Al Storm** **36**
Into Rustlers' Paradise rode the reckless Arizona Ranger to meet the gun-swift challenge of renegade killers lured by the brimstone stench of *murder-for-cash.*

Five Fast Short Stories

TALE OF A DRYGULCHER . . . . . **Ray Ellsworth** **23**
Shoot fast and trust no one when you're linked with the spine-shootin' breed.

BIG SMOKE . . . . . **John C. Ropke** **31**
Was the great, grey stallion still king of wild Dragoon Range?

LONGHORN DESTINY . . . . . **Ruel McDaniel** **49**
Putt Horsby didn't believe there was a man who could take his measure. He must have been sun-balmy.

THE HANGROPE KID . . . . . **Richard Brister** **62**
At last the worm had turned. The orphan kid was top-hand now, and the hangrope he was swingin' might drop 'round any one of a dozen dirty necks.

RAZORBACK WRANGLER . . . . . **W. Scott Sheldon** **71**
Step nimbly, brother brasadero, and shoot straight when you go hawg-wrestlin'.

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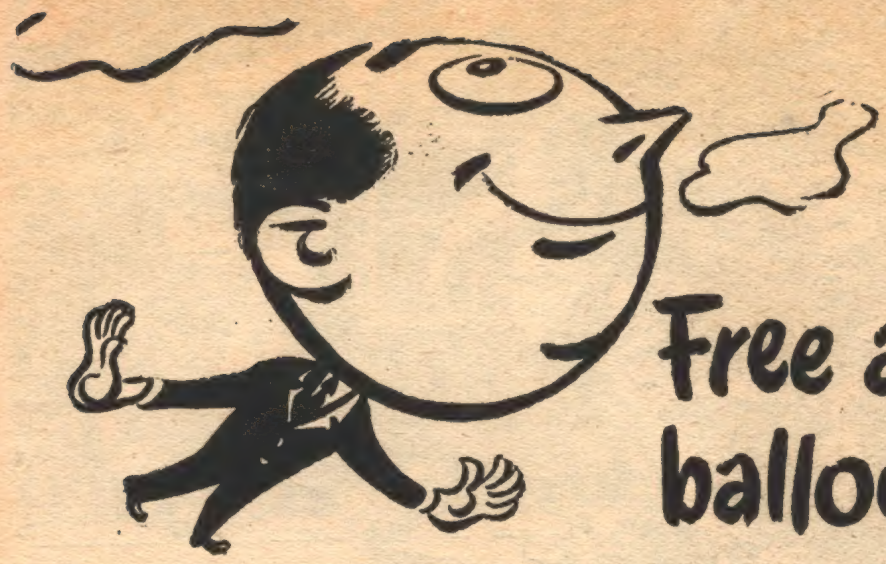

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A.B. VESTAL

Bud's eyes were glued to Black. "It's man to man now, Black. Even up."

TEXAS SPAWNS A WILD-GUN BREED

By Robert Pennington

Like a vicious human bloodhound young Fowler trailed Black Battersee from Texas to Colorado . . . and he swore before lawman and hardcase alike that the showdown would be the wildest bullet-fiesta this side of hell.

HIS HANDS shook from uncontrollable nervousness. He could not balance the Winchester in the cleft of the boulder. And there the big man sat, a perfect target, on the rock below.

He crouched there, trying to control his violent trembling, behind the boulder atop the red cliff which towered above the group gathered on the canyon floor. Their voices came up to him, but he heard only one, the booming voice of the big, black-bearded man seated comfortably on the rock.

He listened to that voice and felt the hate grow bigger in him. He felt that voice reverberate through him, and tried to stiffen himself against the shock that would come when the big man let out with his great, rolling laughter. It was, curiously, that laughter, which he remembered most, which had haunted him through the years.

Searching, always searching, trailing Black Battersee's infamous path, he had worked across Texas, up through New Mexico, into Colorado. And today, riding up the Animas River to Durango, a few miles from there—a distant laugh drifted down a canyon. He had jerked his horse short with such a suddenness that the frightened animal reared and almost threw him. That laugh, even from the

distance, the booming mockery of it, it was ingrained in his memory.

In a deadly calm he turned up the canyon.

The man on the cliff centered his Winchester to the exact middle of the bearded man's forehead, and waited for him to laugh so he could smash that laugh into eternity. His thin face, bronzed from seven months of outdoors, whitening from the strain of waiting. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead and temples, ran down his face. A drop crept into the corner of one eye, and he removed his finger from the trigger to wipe it away.

That's when the man below laughed.

Swiftly the man on the cliff corrected his aim, but he could not pull the trigger. Perspiration clothed his face. He wanted to put the tension on the trigger, but he could not. He was not afraid. Nor was it his conscience. It was the method. Ambush. He could not do it that way. It had to be face to face.

For one thing he wanted Black Battersee to know who was bringing his messenger of death. And, above all, he wanted to stand man to man with Battersee and kill him.

He let the hammer down on the rifle and turned away from the cleft in the boulder. As he did, he felt the point of a gun.

"You'd never lived to hear the echo of your gun, hombre," a cold voice said. "Drop the rifle!"

He turned slowly, hanging to his gun.

"Drop it, hombre! I make a living killing people!"

The rifle clattered on bare rock. Immediately the group below stilled.

That booming voice called up. "You there, Si?"

THE lanky, unshaven man with the levelled Colt called back, "Yeah, boss."

"What's going on?"

"We got a visitor."

"Visitor? The hell! Bring him down!"

"You heard what the boss said." The man named Si motioned with his Colt. "Get going!"

A thin smile crossed the trapped man's face. "What you want me to do? Jump?"

"Hell, it's a good idea, but the boss wants you whole! Walk ahead of me. That way. The cliff breaks up there. There's a slide."

The trapped man started out, slow, long strides. The other hesitated, scooping up the fallen rifle, and followed.

Black Battersee was a tall man, as tall as the prisoner, and where the prisoner was slimly built, Black was heavy, with big, hulking shoulders that threatened to split the black flannel shirt stretched on him. Black's beard was the color of polished coal, and over it his dark, beady eyes squinted questioningly at the cold eyes of the tense prisoner standing before him.

"He was going to ambush you, boss," Si said.

"Ambush me? Hell! So Durango finally dug up somebody at least brave enough to ambush me! How'd you find me?"

The prisoner cut his words hard and fine. "Your laugh gave you away, Black. I was riding up to Durango. But, Black, I'm not from Durango."

"No?"

"I came from a long ways off, Black, and it took me seven months to find you. Since you don't recognize me—I came from Red Sands, Texas."

"Red Sands? Hell, I was born and raised there!"

"I was raised there with you. But probably that twisted brain of yours is too rotten for memories! You probably don't remember a sickly bank teller who admired you for your strength, for your ability to handle anything that required that strength. Maybe he wanted to be strong and big like. Maybe he wanted to idolize himself in the likeness of you."

"Bud Fowler!" Black uttered in slow amazement. "Hell, you're a different man!"

"Five years in prison changes any man!" Bud flung back, his eyes boring unceasingly at Black. "Five years in prison changes a man especially when he's paying for the crime of another!"

Bud Fowler plunged wildly on. "That was the beginning of your career, wasn't it, Black? And you used me, the guy that idolized you, for the beginning. You knew I slept like a log, and you stole into my room, and took the keys I had to the bank. I had worked a little late, getting cash ready for payrolls. You robbed the bank, and when you returned the keys, you planted a sack of money in my closet. They guessed right, Black, that you were in the robbery since you blew town that night,

but that sack of money implicated me, and I couldn't convince them I had nothing to do with it. I spent five years for your dirty deal!"

"Hell," Black snapped. "I meant to throw all the blame on you!"

"What difference? You got away. I went to prison. I thought about you in prison, Black, hating you, and when I got out, I came after you. I had you centered in my rifle sights, Black!"

"Ain't that luck for you?" Black asked of his hardfaced gang. "The man spends five years dreaming of me, seven months hunting me, has his sights on me, and now he's Black's prisoner! Ho!" Black's great, mocking laugh rolled through the canyon.

Bud Fowler surged forward, his fist smashing into Black's mouth. Black staggered back, and Bud moved forward, throwing his other fist, but it barely grazed Black's lowered head, knocking off his black, flatcrowned hat. And quickly, before Bud could throw another blow, Black's gang was on him.

"Tie his hands behind him!" Black ordered. His eyes were livid with anger.

Swiftly Bud's arms were bound behind him. He stood, helpless, breathing fast, and he blurted out, "I could have killed you from the cliff before your man got me—but I didn't!"

"Why?" Black shot out.

"I wanted to have it out face to face. Make it sporting, Black. I let you live so we could have it out, man to man, with guns!"

"All right!" Black said surprisingly. "But not with guns! Man to man, Black's way!" He let his laughter roll out, a short, angry laugh. "Black's way! I'll break you so bad you'll spend more than seven months crawling back to Red Sands!"

Black's huge fist slammed into Bud's face. Bud landed on his back, stunned. He got to his feet.

"Damn you, Black! Untie me!"

Black's fist smashed again. Bud tried to roll with it, and Black followed swiftly, three hammer blows, then a terrific right that snapped back his head, then one to his stomach, doubling him up, driving the wind out of him.

He went down. Black kicked him in the stomach.

In a dizzy sickness Bud staggered to his feet, cursing Black through bleeding lips, and Black's crashing blows threw him against a boulder. There Black held him, and in his weakness he couldn't move, couldn't avoid Black's thundering blows to his head, to his stomach, to his head. He couldn't see any longer. But he could feel the excruciating pain. His body and head was a livid fire, and each blow heaped more wood on the fire, and the flames shot higher and higher until he thought he could stand no more. Then the flames grew spasmodic, dulled, and died.

II

HE WAS conscious first of intense pain, and he didn't know where it came from because it wasn't localized to any one spot. It was all over him, cutting like a dull knife. His groin felt like a multiple rupture. There was a sickness in his stomach, and sharp, piercing thrusts went at his chest. He lay there, with the remembrance of Black's fists pounding him.

It was then that he was conscious of something swabbing his face. He got his eyes open. Everything was blurred. He waited for it to clear.

A woman was sponging his face with a warm, wet cloth. He tried to say something, to get up.

"Oh!" the woman exclaimed. "Don't move now!" she cautioned. And he heard her call sharply, "Dad! Frank! Come here! He's coming to!"

The woman he saw was young, scarcely more than a girl, and even in his misery he saw that she was a shapely thing in the bright calico dress. She was not very tall, and she had long brown hair. Her features were finely moulded, and she had clear gray eyes.

Two men came beside her, an old man and a young man. Both were tall and slender, and had the same fine features of the young woman. The elderly man was white-haired, smooth-shaven. He had a sheriff's badge on his shirt. He turned to a chest of drawers by the bed. Besides a pitcher of water, there was a whiskey bottle and a glass on it. He poured out a good measure of whiskey. Holding the glass, he stood, looking down at Bud.

"Pretty rough?" he asked.

"Rough," Bud acknowledged, his voice husky with weakness.

"Can you take it? It'll make you feel better."

"Yeah," Bud said.

"Here, Mary." The old man gave the glass to the young woman. "Frank. Give a hand."

The young man moved to the other side of the bed, and the two men raised Bud's head and shoulders from the bed.

He gulped from the glass the young woman held, staring into her eyes. He drank it all, and they let him back down. The whiskey raced through him, and began to assuage his pain.

After awhile he muttered, "How'd I get here?"

The old man answered. "Mary came across you. Your horse was wandering along the river. You were tied across the saddle. What happened?"

"I took a beating with my hands tied." Bud grimaced. "Damn Black!"

"Black?"

"Black Battersee!"

The old man's eyes narrowed. "Stranger here, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"How did you know Black Battersee then?"

Bud's mind roved swiftly, hunting the right answer, without arousing any suspicion about himself.

"Heard reports about him riding this way. Anyway, his men called him Black."

"What did he look like?"

"Big. Black beard. Black shirt. Hat."

"Black." The old man nodded. Then he asked quickly, "How did you find him? We've been trying to pin him down for months."

But said tightly, "I was riding up a canyon, came on him and some men. He thought I was trying to ambush him. He said he'd rather break me than shoot me." Bud's bruised lips moved slowly. "Why the suspicious questions?"

"With Black terrorizing the county, we got to be careful of strangers."

Bud's voice got stronger. "Does this look like I was tied up with Black?"

The old man smiled wryly. "He did a good job on you, all right! No, stranger, your story's good enough for me."

Bud felt relief.

"WHERE am I?" he asked.

"At our ranch, two miles from Durango. Southeast."

"Oh. Well, I better get up and make it to Durango." He tried to raise his body. The effort drove fresh pain through him. He groaned, settling back down. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take advantage of your hospitality for a few minutes more. I don't feel like getting up on my feet yet."

The old man smiled. "Longer than a few minutes, stranger. You're in pretty bad shape."

"I can't stay here."

"Why? Urgent business somewhere?"

"No," Bud said. "I was just drifting. Looking for a place to settle down."

"This is a good place," the old man said. "Good country, except—"

"Except what?"

"Black. It was peaceful before he came."

"It will be peaceful again," Bud said.

"I've decided to stick around Durango. Long enough to pay off my debt to Black Battersee."

The old man said "That's a large debt. A lot of people have wanted to get Black. You serious?"

"Dead serious," Bud said. "I've marked him for my guns."

"You've got courage," the old man said. "Speaking from flat on your back. Where you from?"

"Texas. The name's Bud Fowler."

"Bud Fowler? I'm Dave Jones. This is Frank, my son, and Mary. There's just the three of us."

"You're the sheriff."

The old man nodded.

"Need a deputy?"

"Need several. Why?"

"I might as well make it legal."

"Getting Black wouldn't have to be legal." The old man's eyes twinkled. He was beginning to like this young man. "Time enough to talk about that later. How about some grub, Fowler?"

"Not now. I'd like to just lie here awhile."

"Sure! Come on, kids."

The three of them started out of the bedroom.

"Mary," Bud called.

She turned back. "Yes?" Her eyes were very wide.

"Thanks," Bud said.

She smiled, and went out.

The years in prison, and months of manhunting that followed, had given him no time to think of women. They had become only things, wearing dresses, that occasionally flitted across his mind. He had no place for them, even in his thoughts. His life was ruled by a single purpose. Getting Black. But Mary Jones moved easily into his days. When he was up and felt like sitting a horse again, she showed him over the ranch. It was situated in the mountains above Durango.

Frank, a quiet sort of person, managed the ranch whenever his father was absent in his call of duty as sheriff. Mary rode with Bud over the high meadows and through the canyons. They were silent rides interspersed with little talk. Riding beside him, she would look up at his grim face and wish he would smile more. Sometimes, she would catch his eyes, the hard quality in them, the bitter look of a man who had a single, deadly purpose on his mind.

Bud was sworn in as a deputy to Dave Jones, and he and Dave went out to hunt down Black Battersee.

One day they were out, Black rode boldly into Durango with his gang and robbed the bank. He rustled and murdered, but his tricky soul seemed blessed by the gods.

They were always a few hours, sometimes minutes, behind him, or missed him altogether. He and his gang would simply disappear.

Bud and Dave had tracked Black up a narrow winding canyon today where it opened into a wide meadow. But here a herd of cattle had obliterated the tracks, and they could not find any trace of them leaving the meadow. Three canyons opened from this meadow, and all were bare rock bottom.

Finally the two lawmen, hoping on blind chance, picked out one to follow. They rode up it until the rock dropped into soil, but there were no tracks. Black hadn't taken this canyon.

Weariness was in the old sheriff's tone. "Wrong canyon, son."

Bud nodded.

They swung their ponies around. Back in the meadow, they rode around the herd of grazing cattle, and then into the narrow canyon again.

"Wait!" Bud pulled up his pony, pointing down at the ground.

"Yeah," Dave said. "That's their tracks, going back down."

"Luck of the devil!" Bud rasped. "While we were up the wrong canyon, they came out of another, and doubled back the same way they came."

Dave nodded.

"No use riding after them. They've got at least a half hour on us."

"No," Dave agreed. "Bud, the only way we'll ever get Black is find his hideout, and close in."

"Where do we start to find this hideout?"

"I don't know," the old man said helplessly. "I don't know. There's a lot of country around here, and a lot of it unexplored."

Each disappointment deepened the grimness in Bud.

Then twice, payroll messengers to the Silver King Mine were killed and robbed, despite that each man left the bank in Durango in the dead of night, and each took different routes.

Mary and Bud sat on a flat rock directly above Durango. Durango was built on the river, in a narrow canyon, whose sides rose sharply right out of the town. Their ponies nibbled grass nearby. They sat in a tense silence. Mary was staring at Bud's set face.

Suddenly she asked, "Don't you ever relax, Bud? Even for a minute?"

That edge of exasperation in her tone—he turned, looking full at her.

"Relax?" he asked.

She spoke earnestly. "You don't know the meaning of relaxation, do you, Bud?"

And he answered curiously, "Relaxation? No, Mary, I guess I don't have time for it."

"Every one needs relaxation. You never relax. You're like, well, a human bloodhound."

"Human bloodhound?" That struck him as funny. He smiled. The smile broke all over his lean face, into his eyes.

Mary stared at him, like one transfixed. She said gently, "You can smile like that—" she faltered, went on, "Most of the time I'm with you, I might as well be,

well, a rock, or a tree, anything that you might glance over impersonally. Don't you ever look at me as a woman?" She flushed, got up, ran to her pony. Bud caught her.

"Mary," he said. "I think you're beautiful."

"Bud!"

Then he was saying things that he didn't know existed in him.

"I guess I've never known what peace and tenderness and contentment is, Mary, but I guess that's what it's like with you. Not knowing what it is, I guess that's why I didn't recognize it, but that's what I feel with you, Mary."

"Bud!"

"How do you feel about me, Mary?"

"When you're so grim, Bud, I'm unhappy all the time, but when you smile, and it goes out of your eyes, I, well, I don't know how to describe it, Bud."

"Mary. I'd like to feel, like I told you, all the time."

"You can, Bud! You can!"

"That would make you happy?"

"Yes, Bud," she said softly.

Life had taken on new meaning for Bud Fowler. Manhunting, he was still the grim, silent man. But with Mary, he let the grimness go out of him—until the day Bud Fowler found Dave Jones dying up in Red Cliff Canyon.

III

HE SAW her coming across the street. He got up quickly from his desk, wiping the frown from his face. He hoped the worry wouldn't show.

"Hello, Mary," he said pleasantly when she opened the door.

There was no such warmth in her tone. She closed the street door. It was the only outside door to the office. The door at the back opened to the jail quarters.

"Bud," she said tensely, looking up to him with a sadness in her gray eyes, "they promoted you to sheriff of La Plata County this afternoon."

"Yes, Mary." He said it gently.

"The damned cowards!"

He said nothing.

"You can't expect any help."

"No, Mary," he said. "Black Battersee has driven fear into every man and woman and child in this county. I don't think there'd be a soul brave enough to go after him."

Her eyes were boring deep into him. "That means you'll have to go it single-handed."

He nodded.

"Besides that, we know there has to be a go-between in this town, taking information to Battersee." A tremor caught her voice. "What happened to Dad?"

"There were only three people that knew he was going up to Red Cliff," he said hastily. "You. Frank. Myself."

"Yes," she admitted. "It was just an unlucky break for Dad. But how does Black know when a rancher comes to town and leaves his ranch exposed for Black to run off his cattle? How did he find out the payroll money for the Silver King Mine was on its way in the dead of night? Both times?"

"There is a go-between," Bud admitted. "I have to find out who it is. I've got to get Black!"

She said wearily, "And some morning somebody will find you in a canyon, like Dad! Bud, give it up!"

"No, Mary. I can't!"

"I've lost Dad. I don't want to lose you the same way," she pleaded. "Bud. Aren't our plans more important than hunting down a bandit?"

"Vengeance, Mary. Don't you want that for your Dad?"

"Vengeanace? Perhaps. But more than that—"

He caught her hands. They were cold. From fear, maybe. He wanted desperately to drive the fear out of her, but he couldn't.

"I've got to go on with it," he said. "I couldn't quit now, if I wanted to."

"I'm asking you to give it up for me."

He hated answering like this, "I've got a job to do."

"All right, Bud," she said, and drew her hands out of his. She started for the door.

"Mary," he spoke, and she halted. "You mean you're not stringing along with me?"

She spoke without turning around. "I'm saying goodbye, Bud. I'm saying goodbye, because, eventually, maybe soon, I won't get the chance to say goodbye."

He walked up behind her but he didn't touch her.

"You'll go out some day and you won't come back," she said.

"Maybe," he acknowledged. "But if I don't come back, Black goes with me."

She turned then, studying his face closely, and he knew what she saw: the determined cast of a man's features whose thoughts held only one thing — hunting down a man and killing him.

"You were like that when I first knew you," she said. "Not so long ago. But you came out of your hard shell and we fell in love, and made plans. Yes, Bud, you acted like a man with human impulses for awhile, but now I can look at you and see you're hard and cynical again."

Some men are branded that way."

She turned and walked out.

HE STARED dully at the closed door, and across his mind came the image again of Dave lying there by the group of pines. The gathering twilight was made vivid by the red cliffs. He had ripped open the blood-soaked shirt. The old man's eyes had flicked open, but they were already glazed over with the blindness of coming death.

"Bud?" he'd asked huskily.

"Yes?"

"I figured you'd come. I was hoping you'd get here before—" He'd halted for breath. The red cliffs looked blankly down. "They were—up there—on those cliffs—I —didn't get a chance to fire a shot."

His gun had been still in its holster.

"Black?"

"Yeah."

Bud had put his arm under the old man's gray head. "I'm going to take you back to town."

"Not yet. I'm—done in. Bud—" Bud waited a long time. "Bud, I had to wait long enough — to tell you — I'm dying, broken."

"Broken?"

"Bud—I found out—who's spotting for Black."

"For God's sake! Who?"

The old man tried to talk faster. His face had gone ashen gray. "His face, it showed over the cliff, just for a moment, but I saw it, and—I don't know, he looked startled, looking down, like he was surprised. Bud, I sure hope he wasn't in on this, but, he had to be." It was the vague mind of a dying man speaking. Bud hastened to prompt him before it was too late.

"Who was it?"

"Frank?" Bud had uttered in horror.

"My own son," the old man had gasped. "I just can't understand it—but—it was him, so—he's been spotting for Black. But —I just can't believe—he'd tip them off— I was riding—up here today, so they could ambush me."

"No," Bud had said hastily. "Frank wouldn't do that."

"But—besides you—and Mary—he— was the only one that knew—Bud, he was with them!" A long sigh came from the old sheriff, and then he'd put all his remaining strength into a hurried, hoarse whisper, "Bud, you've got to do something about Frank. Something before Mary finds out."

Bud had leaned close.

"Bud—don't ever let Mary—find out— about Frank."

"Never," Bud had promised, though he wasn't sure the old man had heard before he died.

The cynicism that comes from losing faith in human nature, this bitterness toward his fellow man that had grown through the years in prison and his months of searching for Black, welled up in him stronger than ever before as he loaded Dave's body over the saddle of his pony and set out afoot for Durango.

And now even Mary was gone because she had seen the change in him.

The last splash of gold from the sun was dying as he crossed to the west side of Main Street.

He pushed open the bat wings of the Long Bar Saloon and strode to the bar.

"Hullo, Bart."

The short, fat bartender was wiping a wet glass.

"Hullo, Bud. Usual thing?"

"Right."

Bart filled two glasses.

"I'm drinking with you," he explained.

"All right," Bud said, and slid over a dollar. Bart thrust it back.

"Hell no! On me. It's not every day we elect a sheriff."

"Thanks," Bud said. He laid his unlit cigarette on the bar. He was wondering about the odd expression in Bart's eyes.

They tossed off the drink.

"Let's have another," Bart said.

"Sure. I always have two."

Bart laughed. "I forgot!" He refilled the glasses.

"Now that you're sheriff, Bud, what you plan on doing?"

"Plan?" Bud countered.

"Figured you'd have some plan."

"I don't," Bud said.

"You're up against a tough proposition," Bart said, picking up his whiskey glass with his beefy fingers.

BUD lit his cigarette. He blew out a cloud, leaving the cigarette in his mouth. He had had a sudden hunch, the right way to go after Black.

"Seen Frank around?"

"No. Haven't you seen him?"

"Not since the funeral," Bud said. "I thought maybe he'd been around here."

Bart shook his head. "He never did hang around here, except for a few games now and then. Frank ain't much for loitering, you know."

"I guess not," Bud agreed cautiously, getting ready to leave the bar. He turned away.

"What's the hurry? Let's have another drink," Bart said hastily.

"Had enough," Bud answered.

Outside the saloon, he paused on the boardwalk. It was getting dark. A sardonic smile crept on his lean face as he studied his hunch.

Frank was his starting point.

He hadn't seen Frank since the funeral.

Frank would have to carry on as usual at the ranch because of Mary. But, also, he would have to pay periodic visits to the outlaw hangout. Bud Fowler started across the street.

Nearing the office, he heard a scratching noise from inside, like the sound of a spur scraping wood. He swerved to the next doorway, the entrance to his living quarters.

Bud grinned. There was only one way out of the place. He slid his guns into his hands.

He heard the street door squeak. Bud levelled his guns as a man stepped out.

It was Frank. There was still enough light to distinguish his features, his slight body. His hat pulled low, Frank glanced up and down the street, failing to see Bud against the doorway. Frank hurried up the street, mounted, and rode southward, in the direction of the ranch.

Bud stiffened.

Frank might have planted some men in the office. Maybe Black might be there.

Bud turned the knob, kicked open the door, ducked to one side. Silence.

Still he wasn't satisfied. He ran through the door, slid against the wall. He heard no sound in the dark confines of the room.

Bud struck a match and lit the coal oil lamp on the desk.

A folded paper was held to the table top by a pen knife. He jerked it loose and scanned the crudely scrawled message.

Bud Fowler:

Meet me in the deserted warehouse behind Long Bar Saloon. Knock three times on alley door. Now.

Black

IV

BUD locked up the office and cut across the street. Passing the Long Bar Saloon, he nodded to Bart, who was standing just outside the swinging door, lighting a cigar.

Bud walked up the alley to the one-story frame structure behind the saloon. He walked completely around the building. The windows were dark. There was one horse, its reins fastened to a nail beside a window. He approached the alley door. It was ajar. A voice he would always remember, speaking low now, reached out to strike him suddenly.

"Bud Fowler?"

"Yes." His hands were on his guns.

"I saw you head around the building. Figured you'd be cautious. Satisfied?"

"What the hell you want?" Bud rasped.

"Get out of the alley. In here."

Bud went in. The place was dimly illuminated by a coal oil lantern setting on a table by a long window. He judged the window to be the one at which Black's horse was tied. Outside of a few discarded packing cases littering the dirt floor, there was nothing in the place except another table setting beside the one with the lantern on it. Black cloth covered the windows.

"This place has been used before," Bud said flatly.

"Maybe," Black said, and his admittance puzzled Bud.

"Shut the door," Black said.

Bud pushed it shut with his heel.

"Come to the table." Black deliberately turned his back and strode to the table. Bud cursed. He could drop Black in his tracks, but, under the circumstances, he wouldn't, and Black knew it.

There were two chairs. Black took the one facing the alley door. Black pushed the lantern to one side of the table. By silent agreement, they let their hands lay on top of the table.

Bud waited for Black to speak. But Black was curiously silent. He was smiling thinly, showing tobacco-stained, broken teeth.

Bud's lean jaws hardened. His voice grated slightly from the strain of waiting on Black. "I didn't come here just to look at your ugly mug."

Black turned his head and spat on the dirt floor. He wiped at the beard fringes around his mouth with the back of his beefy hand.

"What's your game, Black?"

Black spoke. "Maybe I wanted to reminisce. Old times in Red Sands."

"Hell!" Bud snorted. "Get out with it, Black!"

"You got yourself elected sheriff this afternoon."

"You get news fast, Black. Too damned fast!"

Black shrugged.

"You and I could work together," Black said suddenly.

Bud trembled from the insult.

"You go to hell!"

Black crouched in his chair, his gun hand sliding back and halting at the edge of the table.

"No man ever got away with telling me to go to hell," Black said.

Bud's hands slid back while his eyes watched Black's hand for the beginning of that downward movement.

"Let's keep our hands on the table!" Black said suddenly. "I called you here for talk."

"Talk?" Bud said angrily, his nerves shaky from the showdown that didn't materialize. "Then get on with it. Fast! You didn't invite me here to ask me to work with you. You knew damned well I wouldn't! I hate you, Black. I hate you like a fire that never stops burning!" He halted his reckless tirade, seeing an evil smile break Black's lips.

"You'll hate me worse!" Black said.

"Why?"

"You'll wish you'd crawled back to Red Sands like I told you."

"Damn you, Black, what are you stalling about?"

The alley door burst open behind Bud. It banged against the wall.

Black barked, "This is it, Fowler!"

He went for his guns, but he only slid them out of the holsters. No more. A familiar voice froze his muscles.

"There he is!" the voice shouted. "There's your damned spotter! Our new sheriff! Bud Fowler!"

It was Bart, the saloon keeper.

Bud came to his feet, his guns half up.

Townsmen were pouring through the alley door.

Bud, standing in horrified amazement, not realizing that he was covering Black from the incoming crowd, heard Black's voice behind him.

"Bart showed up in time!"

Black chuckled. Bud spun as Black ripped aside the black cloth over the window and plunged out. There was no glass on the window. Instinctively Bud ducked, barely missing the fusillade of bullets ripping over him at the departing outlaw.

He heard a thunder of hoofs, Black's bellowing laughter, as a shout went up, "Black! Getting away!"

Several men crowded out the door. Shots echoed back into the building when Bud again stood upright.

The crowd of angry men pushed toward him.

"Drop your guns, Fowler!"

He complied. He didn't know what else to do.

TWO men pinned his arms behind him and tied his hands together. It was a silent crowd. They were all as amazed as he. He could see it on their faces. Astonishment mixed with fury. He kept looking at Bart, but Bart wouldn't look at him.

The big saloon man growled impatiently, "Let's get him strung up!"

The crowd came to life.

"Sure! String him up!" they echoed.

"Let him hang for all to see!"

"Damn him for fooling Dave Jones!"

"Damn him for fooling all of us!"

"String the damned spotter up!"

Vicious hands pushed him out of the building, lifted him up on a horse. The horse was led out of the alley to the main street.

He felt the pony's sides quiver against his legs, as if, it too felt the excitement of the moment. His mind was suddenly ragged, and he tried to calm it by letting it dwell on the pony. It was dun colored. Whose was it? He didn't recognize it. His mind wouldn't settle into the calm he needed for clear thinking. He didn't have much time. The mob surged around him.

They jostled against his legs. They halted the pony momentarily, ganging up in front of it. But the man leading the pony pulled it on.

Threats came up to him, evil, coarse threats, hoarse voices of accusation. He couldn't protest. His voice would be lost, shouted down. He couldn't reason with a mob like this.

The mob moved slowly up Main Street. Newcomers joined.

"Sure, Bud Fowler!" he heard shouted. "The damned—"

"Let me get at him!"

"Naw, we'll hang him!"

"Sure, string him up!"

Damn Black. Damn his black soul, Bud thought. He could imagine he could hear Black laughing with his men over this cruel prank.

Bud thought of shouting out what Dave Jones had told him about Frank. And about Frank delivering the note tonight. He could show them the note. It was in his pocket. But that was no good. The note said nothing to clarify his predicament. It was only more incriminating.

He couldn't shout out about Frank, even if it gained him a short reprieve. He had promised Dave Jones. And Mary—

Mary suddenly came into the picture. Mary, who would go through life seeing him on the end of a rope, full of hate for him.

Bud tried to get hold of himself. He had to do something. Quick.

His pony turned as the crowd swerved to one side of the street.

"Nelson's Store!"

"Hell, yes! That's high enough!"

"He'll be in plain sight to anyone!"

This store had a wooden canopy that extended to the edge of the street. A year ago, a freakish whirlwind had ripped the roof off the canopy, leaving its rafters exposed. Nelson had never got around to fixing it. The rafters jutted out like three wooden fingers stuck straight out from the building, twelve feet above the boardwalk.

"Hang him up from the first rafter!" someone shouted.

Bud's pony was bridled roughly under the first rafter, and a looped rope was tossed over it. The man on the bridle forced the pony back to put Bud directly under the rafter. He was too rough. The bit twisted and cut the pony's mouth and it bolted sideways, almost unseating Bud. As it bolted, it caught the loop of the rope smartly on one ear, frightening it more.

The wildeyed pony tried to charge out of the encircling throng. Men gave way but the man on the bridle hung on. Expertly, Bud kept his seat. It had come to him, his only chance of escape. Black's getaway gave him an idea. As the rearing pony lunged back against the building, Bud jerked his boots from the stirrups and threw himself, with the impetus of the pony's lunge, through the window of the store.

He hit the window square, with head and shoulders. There was the sudden shock of striking it, a numbing sense of shattering glass raking him. He struck a stack of pails, sending them clattering. He scrambled to his feet, tried to think of something in the store he could back up against and cut the rope holding his hands behind him. But there was no time for that, as badly as he needed his hands free. Gunfire roared, bullets crashing through the broken window. He heard the front door splintering as bodies rammed against it.

HE ran for the back door, kicking into merchandise piled on the floor. A slug caught him, knocking him down, ripping in one arm and lodging against the bone. If his arms hadn't been tied behind

him, that slug would have gotten him in the back. He got up, ran, not stopping for the back door, but hitting it with his shoulder so hard the lock broke loose and the door flew wide, flinging him headlong into the alley. He squeezed in between two buildings. Just in time. Men started pouring up the alley.

A lantern beamed from the end he had just entered. He fell flat on his face into the dirt. The lantern light was not strong enough to reach where he lay. But it was coming closer.

Bud got to his feet, and came out on an unlighted street. He crouched against a building. They did not see him. When they turned the corner, Bud cut across the street as the men with the lantern emerged from between the buildings.

A dog barked, caught him in a backyard. He swung out with his foot. It was a small dog, and his vicious kick sent it whimpering. He ran on, making for the outskirts of town.

He ran, stumbling a little, and he couldn't understand why he kept stumbling. He was so intent on the single purpose of making it out of town, it hadn't occurred to him yet that loss of blood was sapping his strength so that he faltered on his feet. He cursed because he was afoot, because there was nothing he could do about it. Every available horse would be in use now in the search for him.

There was a barn ahead. He headed for it. He cut around a shed, backed up, flattened himself against the building as a number of men approached with rifles.

He tried to slip around to the other side of the shed. At the corner his form was silhouetted briefly in starlight.

"There he is!"

He ducked, running around the shed as slugs ripped into it. He circled more buildings, trying to draw away. A body of horsemen pounded into sight. He crouched. They hadn't seen him. He changed his course again. He reached another barn, got inside, groped in the dark for the mangers, and found two stalls but both were empty.

Running feet sounded close, and he found a side door, ran out. This was the end of town. The canyon side sloped up ahead of him. He began to climb up a gully. He followed the gully to the edge of an arroyo, started down into it, lost his balance and rolled until a cluster of bushes caught him. He lay in the crushed leaves of the bush, utterly spent.

He lay there, listening to the shouts of the searching men below, to horses whose hoofs echoed through the night, to shots from nervously held guns. They would be spreading out through the countryside soon. This realization forced him to try to get on his feet again, but he didn't have the strength to make it.

He lay on his back, and tasted blood, running from one of the cuts on his face. It dribbled, sickeningly warm, into his mouth. He twisted to one side and spat it out. And it was the warm, sickening taste of blood that drove him to frenzied efforts. He could feel the blood bathing his face, and soaking his clothing from open slashes on his body where the jagged glass of the store window had ripped through his clothing to tear open the flesh. But those cuts, painful as they were beginning to be now, were unimportant alongside his arm. It was his arm that was going to play him out in the end. He hadn't had time to think about that arm while running in desperate escape, but now that he lay here, temporarily safe, he could feel the angry fire of the gun wound, throbbing up, through his shoulder, and down through his body. He had to do something about that arm, but how the hell could he when it was tied securely behind him?

Growing sounds indicated that some horsemen were criss-crossing the slope above.

Bud extricated himself from the bush and crawled to the bottom of the arroyo and up the other side. In the bare starlight he could see no riders. He cut across a stretch of level, grassy ground in a slow, stumbling walk.

He heard the sound of scuffed rock, looked back. Two riders came out of the arroyo. He crouched to the ground, thanking fortune that there was no moon. Ahead was the dark line of a narrow defile. He crawled forward and slid into it; a rain-wash, scarcely three feet deep, and full of sharp rock. He lay flat, scarcely breathing. The riders approached.

"Haven't seen a damned thing move yet. Have you?"

"Hell no."

"Let's swing south."

They rode on. Bud breathed freely again. He crawled to his knees. Hell! If he could find a rock big enough so it wouldn't turn he might be able to sever the rope. Bud hobbled around until his knee struck a long, irregular rock imbedded in the soil. His knee, searching over it, found a jagged edge. He sat down with his back to the rock, working around until he felt the rope against the sharp edge.

He began to work his arms as much as possible, raking the rope across the rock. It was painful, slow. Every movement increased the fire in his arm. Stubbornly he kept at it.

V

THE ROPE parted. Slowly he brought his arms in front of him.

His good arm was numbed from its cramped position, and he waited for blood to surge through it and make it right. As soon as he could use his fingers, he tore the shirt sleeve away from the wound on his other arm. The slug had gone against the bone in the upper part of the forearm. The wound was beginning to clot, but was still bleeding some. He ripped a long strip from the front of his shirt, and with his teeth and his good hand, he tied the strip around the wound, so tightly it increased the fire of the wound, but he could stand that to stop the flow of blood.

He got to his feet. How? He didn't know, except some inner strength he didn't know he had left got him up. He was so exhausted he wanted to lie back down and rest. But he had to go on. Where? He didn't know that either.

He walked through the night, and it was a slow, tortured, wobbly gait. The full force of his inextricable circumstances kept throbbing through his mind, and the fever from the wound crept up into his head and mixed with pulsating thoughts.

He was finished.

For nearly six years he had hated a man with fearful intensity, and he had found him. But now Black, the hunted, had reversed the deal. Bud was the hunted.

Bud Fowler wobbled on through the night. Part of Dave Jones parting words came to him. *I don't know what you can do about Frank.* Words formed on Bud's hot, fever-ridden lips as if Dave Jones was beside him, and he was talking to him. *There's nothing I can do about Frank,* Bud's lips said soundlessly. *There's nothing I can do about myself. I can't even get Black because I don't know where he hangs out. I've got men hunting for me and I haven't any guns, not even a horse. I've got to make it out of the country, but I can't. I'm too far gone.*

He wobbled on.

I got to see Mary before they get me. I gotta tell her. She won't believe me. It won't help me any. But I gotta see her. I gotta tell her the truth.

He went through the night, cursing Black, cursing Frank, cursing himself. Then, after awhile, he didn't curse anybody because the fever was burning his brain, and it became incapable of thinking. He had to fight it to remember that one important thing.

I gotta see Mary.

He dragged through knee-deep grass, wet with night dew. By instinct he would sink into it, flat, whenever he heard horses near. Then somehow, he got up and wobbled on. He crossed interminable ravines, broke through bushes, crawled among boulders. Then he forgot everything, started weaving crazily about, and moved headlong into a thorn bush. Sharp thorns stung him partially to his senses. He remembered.

I gotta see Mary.

He climbed up a low ridge. Down the side. At the bottom he stepped into a small brook. He dropped full length in the cold water, letting it soak him to the skin. He drank, slapped it on his face, splashed it through his hair. He rolled over on his side, immersing his right arm. The shock of the cold water calmed his seething brain.

He decided he was on the outskirts of the Jones Ranch.

He sat up in the brook as the sky lightened. The moon was coming up. He could not see it yet, from down in the ravine, but it was not the bright glow of a full moon. He guessed that he had three or four hours until daylight.

A light breeze came up from the south, and with it came the odor of smoke. He saw a spark, then a flareup. Somebody's

campfire, almost out, and the breeze was whipping a few coals to life. It was not more than a hundred yards, he judged.

He got to his hands and knees. A smoldering campfire meant a sleeping man. A gun. A horse. Provisions. For the first time tonight he felt a ray of hope. He crawled toward that campfire, moving cautiously over the loose stones bordering the brook. He halted.

He had heard trotting horses from below the campfire. Others had seen the fire. He flattened to the ground. The startled grunt of an awakened man came to him as the horses neared.

"Who goes here?"

He couldn't hear the reply.

Then.

"We're looking for Bud Fowler!"

"Bud Fowler? Why?"

Bud remembered that voice. One of Jones' punchers.

Now their voices were muffled by the horses kicking stones as they backed away from the fire that now burned higher. The sleeping man's first act on awakening had been to throw fresh wood on the fire. Bud saw the Jones' rider strap on a gun, then head off. He came back leading a pony. He mounted, and the three switched their ponies down the ravine in the direction of the Jones' homesite.

If Mary didn't already know, she soon would.

Bud got to his feet, his legs trembling from weakness. Thrusting all caution aside, he stumbled to the campfire. He found a grubsack nearby, dragged it by the campfire. The heat of the fire felt good. All he found readily edible in the sack was a slab of bacon. By the fire were two tin cups and plates, and a tin can half filled with brewed coffee. He slid the coffee against the flame. Two plates and cups meant two punchers. One, then, was likely out riding herd. Two riders might mean an extra horse. He saw a pony haltered a few yards away.

With his pocket knife he sliced a thick slab of bacon, rammed it on a stick, and held it over the fire. He didn't attempt to cook it, just scorched it, then wolfed it. He drank two cups of hot coffee. He felt stronger, steadier on his feet.

He led the pony to the fire, tied the grubsack behind the saddle, and crawled on.

The pony had a peculiar, rolling gait that made it difficult for him in his weakened condition. Sticking on became a jolting effort, and the fever again overtook him.

SHE listened to the men ride away from the ranch. They were all going. A man couldn't get far on foot with his hands tied. He might hide out by night, but when day came—her slender body shivered under the blue cotten nightgown. She had not bothered to comb her hair. It hung, disheveled, about her shoulders.

Her wide gray eyes held a peculiar lack of expression. Sane thinking had been wiped from them. She stood there a long time, near the open kitchen door, motionless, unthinking. Then she realized the kitchen floor was cold to her bare feet, and a chilly breeze pushed through the open door. Mechanically, she moved to the big iron kitchen range, and removed a lid, took some kindling from the box behind the stove, and started a fire.

The crackling of the fire was loud in the quiet room. It reverberated through her empty head. The light from the kerosene lamp on the table behind her cast a small shadow against the wall.

The opening of the kitchen screen door struck loudly through the stillness. She turned swiftly.

"Oh—Frank."

He stood inside a moment, listening to the crackling of the fire, then shut the door.

"There's no use heating all outdoors."

Leaving his hat on, he crossed the room to stand beside her, holding his hands over the stove.

"It's cold out tonight."

She looked up at him, his slim face, the nose straight like her own.

"I thought you had gone with the others," she said numbly.

"I was helping the boys round up the horses."

He unbuttoned his rawhide jacket.

"I didn't want to leave you alone."

"Alone?" She thought that an odd thing to say. She turned around, her back to the stove.

"I would rather be alone," she said, then

she burst out, "Don't you understand? It was Bud!"

And Frank said huskily, "It comes hard."

She nodded, her voice breaking, "It comes hard."

Frank said nothing more. A queer expression lighted his face. She left the room, and came back, carrying a horn-handled Colt. It had been her father's gun. She held it out to Frank.

"You'd better go, Frank," she said. "You can overtake the others."

He took it, laid it on the kitchen table. A gun belt hung on the wall. He removed it and strapped it around him, slid the gun from the holster, laying it on the table. He picked up the horn-handled gun, balanced it a moment, and slid it into the holster.

A few moments later she heard him ride away.

She stayed in the kitchen, doing nothing, even unable to think any more. The fire burned down, went out. The first light of day showed outside, and there were the morning sounds of things awakening. She heard a horse approach, stop at the back door. She heard her name called.

"Mary! Mary!"

It was low-spoken, with a huskiness that made it sound almost incoherent, but she would know that voice anywhere.

She picked up the gun Frank had left on the table, flung open the door, and stepped out. He was hunched low on the saddle.

His clothing was bloody and torn, his hair mussed and matted, and his eyes stared out of his cut, scratched face.

"You!" she said. "You dared to come here!"

And he spoke. It was a voice of a man who appeared to be propped on the saddle by some miracle of invisible strength.

"Anyone around?"

"No," she answered shortly, staring at him but finding no pity yet.

He tried to straighten himself on the saddle, but he could do little more than stay on. He held the reins in one hand. The other arm hung loosely. It had ceased to bleed but the barest movement of it racked him with pain.

"Mary—"

"Why did you come here?"

"I had to see you. I wanted to tell you—"

She cut him off. "There's nothing to tell me. They've already been here."

"It was a trap, Mary."

"A trap?" she asked scornfully. Her face was very white. She was holding the gun by her side.

HE PUSHED out the words. "Believe me, Mary. I'm not lying. I went over to Bart's for a drink after you left. When I went back to the office, I found a note from Black asking me to meet him in the deserted warehouse—"

She cut in, "Of course he would leave a note. He'd hardly look you up in the open."

"But he didn't leave the note."

"Then who did?"

He saw the futility of trying to explain but he stuck to it stubbornly.

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know."

"Mary. It was Bart that led the men to the warehouse. Think, Mary, how would Bart know I was going there? How would he know Black was there?"

"You're trying to tell me that Bart is in with Black?"

Bud nodded.

"Bart didn't know that Dad was riding alone up to Red Canyon that day. Only three people did, you, Frank, and myself. Yet Black found out so he could ambush Dad. You were that one! It all fits in now!"

"Mary! It's entirely possible that it was pure chance, your Dad's death."

"Maybe, but there have been too many. They weren't all chance!"

"Mary—"

But she rushed on. "No wonder you wanted to be sheriff. That would be very convenient for Black! What a joke for you two!"

"Mary. Listen to me!" And he said swiftly the one thing he thought would make her pause and listen. "Mary. I'm a convict!"

"A convict?" she said coldly. "Go on. Nothing would surprise me now."

Quickly he told her of his years in prison, of tracking Black here. When he was almost through, she plunged in.

"Why are you telling me this? If it were

true, what good would it do? No, I don't believe you. They found you with Black! It all fits in, even your years in prison. You weren't as quick as Black back there in Red Sands, were you?"

"Mary! The beating he gave me when I first got here!"

"What better than a farce between you two, to make it convincing that you had nothing to do with Black, so you could get firmly entrenched amongst the people of Durango as a spotter for Black?"

She brought the gun up.

"Mary."

"A life for a life. My father's life!"

He knew she'd pull the trigger, and he had no power to move, no urge. He waited for the slug, not caring.

Sharp sounds broke into the heavy silence of her momentary hesitation — the sound of galloping horses. The disturbance shattered Bud's immobility, driving into his numbed brain the instinctive thought of escape. He spurred his horse and rode behind the barns.

Two of Jones' punchers burst around the house, halted their ponies.

"Miss Mary! Who was it!"

She hardly heard. She still held the gun in levelled position. Now she let her hand drop.

"He got away."

"Which way did he go?"

She pointed the way.

"He won't get far!" They rode away.

Mary went into the kitchen. She got to the table, sank to a chair, and dropped the gun on the table.

She said aloud, "I could have shot him, but I didn't! Before God, I couldn't!"

Then her reserve broke completely, and she buried her face to her arms on the table, and cried.

VI

HE RODE through the mountains, keeping to the forests for cover, and somehow eluded capture. About noon, he halted in a deep ravine, flanked on all sides by high trees. It would be safe here to build a small fire. It was not that he was hungry, but simply that he knew he must eat to regain strength.

His arm was swelling, pushing against the sleeve. It felt like a thousand stabbing needles. He ripped open the sleeve to relieve the pressure.

Squatting there eating, he kept thinking of Black, hating him with terrible intensity.

And then it came to him. Why had Frank taken the word to Black that his father was riding up Red Canyon that day? Why, unless Red Cliff Canyon was the answer to Black's hideout?

The entrance to Red Cliff Canyon was an area a hundred yards wide, strewn with stumbling rocks through which the pony picked its way with caution. A good trout stream flowed out of the canyon, cascading blue water that came from melting snow in the high peaks above. The canyon was tortuous, and two miles up became inaccessible where the creek tumbled down a short waterfall. Halfway to the waterfall, the red cliffs began—where he had taken his beating from Black, where he had found Dave Jones dying.

He rounded a shoulder, just below that fateful spot. Somebody was there, and he came on him so unexpectedly he had no time to pull back out of sight. The man sprang to his feet. It was Frank.

Bud pushed his horse forward. Frank drew his gun. The click of the hammer pierced the tumbling of the stream, or maybe it was some involuntary clicking in his brain as he saw Frank pull back the hammer. Bud rode steadily toward him, staking all on the blind hope that Frank would hold his fire.

"Stay where you are!" Frank exploded.

"Sure," Bud muttered. He stopped his pony, slid down. His wild, bloodshot eyes bored at Frank.

Frank got almost to him, then stopped aghast.

"You! I didn't recognize you!"

"Take a look at a man journeying through Hell," Bud said savagely, and took a step toward him.

"Funny we meet almost on the spot where your Dad was killed. What kind of fear does that put you in?"

"What?" Frank asked abruptly, his eyes flaring wide.

"I think you suspected it when you delivered that note last night.

"Suspected what?"

"The last thing he said was, 'You've got to do something about Frank.'"

"You're lying!" Frank stammered.

"He saw you," Bud said. "Looking down from the cliff up there." He watched Frank's face go white. "Not a pretty picture for a father to die with!"

Frank shuddered.

"Nobody knows but me," Bud said. "I didn't tell anybody. Shoot me! I haven't a gun. Shoot me, then nobody'll know!"

"I can't!" Frank said hoarsely. "I'm no killer!"

"You lousy weakling!" Bud shouted, and slapped Frank across the mouth with his open hand. Frank staggered back. Bud followed him up, grabbing him by the shirt front.

"Where's the hideout?"

"I can't tell you."

"Damn it, where's Black's hideout!"

"They'll kill me!" Frank pleaded.

"You sniveling coward!" Bud slapped him again. "And I promised your Dad to get you out of this! Hell, you're not worth it! Where's the hideout?"

At last Frank muttered, "Above the canyon."

"Up this canyon?"

Frank nodded.

"I thought the waterfall was as far as you could go!"

"There's a rock slide behind the clump of spruce, on the left side of the waterfall, wide enough for a horse, but you'll have to lead your horse up. It's that steep. Then ride up the stream about two hundred yards. There's a narrow cut in the right cliff. That takes you up to the box canyon."

Frank sank back against a boulder, sweat running down his face, his eyes haunted.

"The box canyon. That's the hideout?"

Frank nodded.

"How long is it?"

"Half mile. Cabin's at the other end."

"Any guards?"

"Always one. Maybe two. Why?"

"I'm giving you a break, you rat! A chance to leave the country. And no way of Mary ever finding out what you are!"

It came out of Frank in a rush.

"But I didn't kill Dad! I didn't. I knew he was riding up here, and I was afraid he'd stumble onto the hideout and get himself killed, so I warned Black about it, got him to promise to decoy Dad away. But, instead, Black—"

"Being mixed up with Black is enough to brand you as a killer, you fool! Stop whimpering! I haven't time to listen to you. I've got a job to do. And you, I'm giving you a clean ticket."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to get Black and as many of his gang as I can."

"You'll never be able to do it!"

"No?"

"What about Mary?" Frank asked. "She told me you were there."

"In her eyes, like everyone else, I'm where you ought to be, damn you!" Bud snapped. "Give me your gun!"

FRANK handed it over. Frank was standing straight now. There was color in his face again. He said, "You're ready to fall over now. You're full of fever. You'll never make it!"

"A fine time for you to worry about my health!"

Frank flushed.

"Take my horse back with you," Bud said.

"Your horse? You going this afoot?"

"A horse will only attract attention."

"You need a horse to get away."

"Away? Hell, Frank, you know damn well I'm taking a one-way journey!" Bud spun the Colt. It was full. He stuck it in his belt. He said, "One thing I forgot, Frank."

"What?"

"Bart. I can't do anything about him."

Frank said slowly, "Bart was the cause of all this."

"Bart? How?"

"I had too many drinks in Bart's place. One night I killed a man. A respected town man. He wasn't carrying a gun, and I thought he was reaching for one. There were only the three of us there. Bart said it'd go tough for me if people found out I'd shot an unarmed man. He promised to clear me if I'd go on an errand for him. It sounded simple. I had to do something. I agreed.

"Bart lugged the body out in the alley, and nobody knew who did it. The errand was a message to Black. Bart had been acting as a spotter for Black, letting him know when ranchers came to town; when payroll money was leaving town; things like that. Bart didn't like the risk of slip-

ping off to see Black with information. He wanted a go-between. I fell right into it, and he kept on blackmailing me under threat of exposing the killing I'd done."

Bud's voice was unsympathetic. "It would have been much easier to take it on the chin at first."

Frank nodded. "I was weak."

He turned away from Bud, untied his pony from a tree nearby, rode up to Bud's pony and took the reins.

"I'll take care of Bart," he said, and turned down the canyon, leading the extra horse.

Bud started up the canyon.

Up the slide. Above the waterfall. Up the stream. He lay amongst jumbled boulders, watching the guard by the cut in the cliff, wondering how he would get by.

After what seemed hours, the guard stood up and walked to the stream. He bent to drink, his back to Bud. Bud, hoping the sound of the stream would break his footsteps, ran for the cut. He made it, kept running and plunged headlong into a canyon. He halted, gasping for breath. Ahead lay a grassy meadow. At the other end of it he could see a cabin, a corral and a shed.

The grass was knee deep in the long meadow. He ran into it, fell to his hands and knees, and started a slow, painful crawl toward the cabin.

Just after dusk, he stole to the cabin and looked in. Black sat in front of the fireplace. He was playing cards with three men. Bud counted three other men in the cabin, stretched out on bunks. Seven men, including Black. He had six shots, and most of them would be for Black.

He pulled away from the support of cabin wall, swaying on his feet. This was it. All he had to do was make it through the door. He took one step, would have fallen, but he hit the cabin wall, clung to it for support, and stayed on his feet. His bad arm was a stick of livid fire fastened to his shoulder, and the fire was spread out all through him, into his head. He had little time. He was going to pieces.

He slid along the wall, to the door, pulled out the gun, kicked open the door. He didn't see the others. Only Black. He heard his own voice, but it seemed far away.

"This is it, Black," he was saying. "Go for your gun. When it comes up—"

Black's face, the room, everything began to spin. Desperately he pulled on the trigger.

VII

THE TASTE in his mouth was whiskey. Then he felt his face sting, again and again. He got his eyes open. They blurred, began to clear. His head was laying on a table. A brutal hand was slapping his face.

"Enough, Boys!" It was Black's voice.

He got his head off the table. Black's face swam before him.

"You're a tough guy to kill," Black said.

Bud got his head a little higher. Black's dark eyes held a peculiar expression.

"You got guts, Fowler. I admire a man with cast-iron guts like you. But it ain't safe to have you around. Hell, you ought to be dead now, but you ain't, so it ain't safe to have you around. I'm going to kill you, Fowler. Now. But I'm going to give you a sporting chance just because I admire your guts."

Bud licked at his hot lips but he did not attempt to speak.

"Look at the table, Fowler."

There were two guns on the table. One before him. One in front of Black.

Bud felt a trembling in him. But it wasn't from fear.

"All right, Black," he said hoarsely. "Let's get it over with."

He grabbed the gun, pulled it up, pulled the trigger, again and again. Black sat still, watching him.

Bud screamed wildly, "Damn you, Black, you gave me an empty gun!"

Black roared with laughter. Bud hurled the empty gun at him. Two men pinioned his arms, holding him. Black picked up the gun from the floor, stuck it in his belt.

"I'll keep it as a souvenir. From a man who tried to kill me with an empty gun!" Black rolled out his laugh again.

Bud fought to get loose, screaming curses.

"Throw him out!" Black said. "Just throw him out the door. In the morning we'll haul him off. He's done anyway!"

They carried him out and tossed him to the dirt.

He lay there, wishing the fever would take him away.

A voice broke through his sobbing.

"Bud! Bud!" A man's hands rolled him over. "Bud. It's Frank!"

"Frank?"

"I got here just in time to see them throw you out. I was hiding. Bart's on his way, Bud. I decided to do it this way, to save Mary public shame. I told Bart that Black wanted to see him, then I headed this way. He said he'd be here just after dark. Yes! There's a horse coming across the meadow now."

Bud whispered hoarsely, "Get me out of the way! Grab hold of me!"

Frank half-carried him around the corner of the cabin. Slid him down to the ground.

"I hoped to work it before you tackled Black," Frank whispered.

Bud grunted bitterly.

"Quiet!" Frank whispered.

A horse came up to the cabin. Bart called out.

"Black!"

The door opened. Black's voice.

"Bart! What you doing here?"

"Frank said you sent for me."

"Frank? Hell no! I haven't seen Frank for several days."

"What?"

"Come on in!"

"How many guns you got?" Bud asked.

"Two. Why?"

"Get me up!"

"Hell, man! You're done in!"

"Get me up!"

Bud steadied himself against Frank.

"Gimme a gun!"

Frank pressed one in his good hand.

"Help me 'til we get in the door, then turn loose. I'll take Black!"

They got to the door.

"What the hell, Frank?" Black began, getting off a chair. Bart rose with him. "What you bringing him in for? And what's the idea of telling Bart—"

They pushed through the door.

"I'm coming after you, Bart!" Frank said, and let go of Bud.

Bud swayed, hearing Bart shout, "Damn you, Frank!" Then a shot.

Bud's eyes were glued to Black. "It's man to man now, Black! Even up!" He swayed wider, almost off his feet as Black went for the gun in his belt. He fell, to his side, got the gun up, on Black, holding it steady with both hands, pulled the trigger, once, twice, and Black staggered, a foolish expression in his eyes as he pumped the trigger on the silent gun.

"By God," he said. "The empty gun!"

"The gun you tricked me with!" Bud screamed. "Now laugh, damn you, laugh your stinkin' guts out!"

He pulled the trigger again, and the slug stopped Black's forward stagger. He hung there on his feet, and the gun slipped from his fingers.

Bud emptied his gun at two other gunmen. There was a thump, Frank was beside him. "That's all, Bud," Frank mumbled. "That's all."

Bud looked away, towards Black. The big, black-bearded man was still standing, but there was no life in him. He was propped on his feet, and there was no light in his eyes. Then his body toppled.

BUD LAY for a long time with his eyes open before he realized he was in Mary's room at the ranch.

Mary said, "You've been out for forty-eight hours."

"Frank—" he asked.

"He died, but—but, he told me the truth, so, so you and I could be happy together. Oh, Bud, he redeemed himself as best he could."

"Yes," Bud said. "He did." He reached over with his good hand, touching the bandages. "My arm."

"The doctor took out the slug. Two more out of your side. You're lucky he didn't have to amputate the arm."

"A drink, Mary, please."

She brought a glass of water, held it for him while he drank. Her eyes were very close. He saw the bitterness in them.

He said gently, as she set down the glass. "Don't let it get you, Mary. Remember he redeemed himself. Don't let the bitterness get you, Mary. I lived in a shell of bitterness for six years. It isn't easy."

"Oh, Bud!" she uttered in a sob, and she dropped her head on the bed beside him, crying, and he smoothed at her hair with his good hand.

TALE OF A DRYGULCHER

By Ray Ellsworth

The threat of violence hung over the town like a heavy mist. Silent, watchful men cautiously circled the jailhouse. For Maloney was inside and ready to be sprung—and mean, slippery, King Tabor, a guns-for-hire guy, claimed he'd do the job alone.

KING TABOR casually asked:

"Why do you send for me, Carr?"

"Because you are the man for the job," Carr Sutton answered.

Tabor smiled without parting his lips, the corners of his wide mouth drooping. King Tabor was the man for the job from the Red River to the Sacramento, from the Missouri to the Columbia, because he was a cool, mean ranny with his hands, fast with a gun, and fearless.

Tabor did not look at Carr Sutton, but he knew the shrewd, black eyes in the older man's round, complacent face were upon him, appraising him, weighing him. Tabor did not look, either, at the girl sitting with them, but he knew that she was beautiful, and that she did not belong, somehow, beside Sutton. He had been in Granada City three hours, and had observed Sutton three times. Each time there had been the girl. Yet, she didn't belong.

Tabor said: "Maybe you're right."

In this small room at the back of the courthouse, there was peace. Outside, beneath the dying California sunlight, men walked warily with guns low on their hips, the hatred in their hearts.

At Baldy Kelly's Funeral Parlors, a silent line of men and women waited turn to pay tribute to a small, white-haired man stretched without adornment in a fresh pine box. A man withered by age, wasted with illness, who had fought the people's battles, made himself their voice, printed himself and his newspaper into their hearts

and minds until his courage had gotten him killed in their defense.

Tabor glanced briefly at the girl and caught her eyes moving quickly from him to the glass in front of her.

"It's a nasty situation," Sutton said heavily. "Baker Putnam was well liked, and Maloney—well, you know Maloney's type. But we must see justice done. This Vigilante craziness is bad—bad for the people—bad for business—bad all around."

Contempt flavored Tabor's cool attention of Sutton. He caught the glint of a derringer in the left sleeve under the big man's white linen coat. Tabor didn't like Sutton. He felt the western man's scorn for the gutter-snipe precautions the politician thought necessary.

Producing a silk handkerchief, Sutton wiped his face and neck carefully, and continued.

"Maloney is supposed to come to trial in three days, but if the Vigilantes get him first, it will be the Sheean brothers kind of affair all over again."

"The Sheean brothers were friends of yours, weren't they, Carr?"

A glint of hardness made Carr Sutton's quick look at Tabor a flash of his eyes.

"They worked for me, King. I knew their families." Sutton shook his head. "A very bad affair. We don't want it repeated."

"They were burned," the girl said, quietly, unemotionally. "They were burned alive by the Vigilantes."

TABOR leveled his steel grey eyes fully on the girl. He saw that she was more than beautiful. There was a refinement to her that did not match Sutton's heavy manner. But there was a hardness, too. King Tabor liked the hardness as much as the beauty.

"So I heard, Miss Merrill," Tabor said.

"We must move Maloney tonight," Sutton said. Impatience was in his voice. "He's in jail now, of course. These—these Vigilantes aim to get him tonight as well—after Putnam's funeral. I've posted a notice promising a fair trail and justice, but it has been ignored. So I want Maloney out."

"You're the Mayor," Tabor said. "Why don't you just take him out?"

"The people might misunderstand. Besides," Sutton cleared his throat, "they already have the jail surrounded. I can't afford an open show of force unless they press it—right now. Sheriff Callahan has orders to stop anybody trying to move Maloney."

"And you want from me?"

I want you to get him out of there so that no one will suspect I'm involved. I'm forced to play a lone hand here and yet I can't do anything for myself. The situation is desperate. It is a one man job—a King Tabor job."

Tabor contemplated the long ash on his cigarette. Sutton was right, it was a one man job.

Baker Putnam, convinced Sutton's government was corrupt, had campaigned vigorously against him. Putnam had built up a following, fought from the inside and the outside, gathered evidence he was certain could renovate the air of Granada City considerably.

His method had been an elimination campaign, picking on the vulnerable underlings first, then gradually climbing higher until Sutton was stripped of his ablest lieutenants. The people, encouraged and aroused by Putnam, had begun to move with guns in their hands.

The month previous a band of masked night riders had cornered Tom and Grant Sheean in their home, locked them inside, and fired the place. From that, Sutton had won a respite. It had been a little too brutal. Sutton's vigorous words about Vigilante law getting out of hand carried some weight after that.

But Putnam protested his innocence in the affair, saying it had been a band of irresponsibles and not his men. He continued his attacks on Sutton. Maloney, Sutton's closest confident, was next. Frightened, Maloney had picked an argument with the old man, forced him to draw, and killed him in a public bar. Maloney claimed self-defense.

Any other time, or any other public figure, and Maloney could have gotten away with it. But Putnam was too well liked, and Maloney had been crude about it. The citizens and the Vigilantes went after him. Sutton had to jail him and schedule a trail. The Vigilantes were still after Maloney. Their faith in Sutton's jury trails had been undermined by some previous

instances involving Sutton compatriots.

Tabor said: "I understand."

Sutton wiped his face with the silk handkerchief and seemed relieved.

"There's a shack out on Glenn Creek. Place called Aiken's Point, just outside of Granada. I'll meet you there. Once you deliver Maloney to me, your job is over."

"Sounds easy," Tabor commented. "For a thousand."

Carr Sutton blinked. The suggestion of a smile hung at the corners of Miss Merrill's lips.

"I'm doing my best in this, Tabor," Sutton said, slowly, "but you're making yourself too high."

Tabor smiled. Maybe Sutton thought he could shoot Maloney clear himself—with his little sleeve gun—and save the money.

"Can't make a thing like justice come too cheaply, Carr."

It wasn't a thing he cared much for anyway. Sutton had made his bed, let him lie in it. Maloney would get what was coming to him. Justice was a woman with a band over her eyes.

"It's a dangerous job," came Miss Merrill's soft voice, "and may make enemies for Mr. Tabor. Perhaps it is not too much after all, Carr."

Tabor looked at the girl, trying to conceal his surprise. He saw her level gaze down Sutton's look of protest.

"All right," Sutton let his breath out slowly. "Half now, the other half when you deliver Maloney."

KING TABOR accepted the heavy roll of banknotes and stood up. With a bow for Miss Merrill he turned his back on Carr Sutton and strode out of the courthouse.

The threat of violence hung over the town like a mist. Silent, watchful men gathered around the general vicinity of the jail and courthouse. Directly in front of the Sheriff's office a knot of them stood without speaking. In the Chinese restaurant next door others leaned moodily over coffee. Black rain clouds bundled northward in the sky, a damp gloom against the dying sun. Beyond, the ring of mountains dwarfed the town and the men.

King Tabor walked down the walk to the Settlers Hotel. Several of the men before the jail watched his slim figure in its black broad-cloth coat, Texas boots, and pan-cake black hat as he turned into the open doors of the Hotel.

In his room Tabor placed the roll of currency in his battered valise. Turning to the window, he allowed his gaze to range the length of the street below. His glance lingered at one squat, square frame building. The red and gilt sign splashed across its front read: "Granada News-Gazette." A black wreath hung from the closed door, and the wide office window had an empty look.

Baker Putnam.

Thinking of Putnam, Tabor found his gaze settling on the misty, shadowed mountains. In their brown, barren majesty was a hint of Putnam's spirit. Putnam had lived for this land, had fought always those who would not allow the west to grow.

Thoughtfully, Tabor built and lighted a cigarette. He pulled at it, watching the show-down gathering in the street as the shadows lengthened. As he watched, the number of men increased.

Once, King Tabor had fought Baker Putnam's kind of battle. Now he was only the man for the job.

He dropped the half-smoked cigarette to the scarred pine floor and ground it out with his heel. Turning, he shoved his valise far under the bed, then lifted his twin Colts from their holsters. He adjusted a live cartridge to rest beneath each firing pin, and replaced them. Facing the doorway, he glimpsed his melancholy image in the clouded mirror of the dresser.

Memories flooded him. Debts unpaid. Promises broken. Battle fought for fun. For money. For women—and once for a hope. A hope that had glittered like a polished diamond. He had been a different man then. Now, a black wreath hung on an old man's door, a fox-faced man in a jail sought deliverance from his mortal sin, a lovely girl sat in on a hard man's game playing from the middle out—and Carr Sutton had given King Tabor promise of money out of fear of Vigilantes who burned their victims alive.

Tabor shrugged and went on out the door. He respected Putnam, but somewhere he had lost part of himself playing Putnam's way. Now he didn't lose any-

more. He had changed sides and knew how to win.

Putnam's burial was over. The crowd dispersed. The lights in the bistros fought against the gathering dusk.

With the wind damp on his face, King Tabor got his big Claybank mare from the livery stable behind the Chinese restaurant and cased the town carefully, watching with keen, calculating attention the showdown gathering in front of the city jail. Except to watch, he avoided it, riding the narrow back streets. He would use it when the time came—for his own purposes.

He rode south to Glenn Creek for a look-see, planning his trail to the cabin which would have to be routed in the dark. Then he swung back through the alleyways of Granada.

The twilight had deepened by the time he reached the grassy knoll that served Granada for a grave yard. The damp wind rustled the grass among the crude crosses and few stone markers. Tabor sat silently on the Claybank looking down at where Baker Putnam's fresh mound of earth stood out starkly against the green. He dismounted and removed his hat.

"Happy landings, old timer," he said.

Something moved beside him in the dusk. Tabor whirled, his slim body tensed like a drawn string, crouching forward and down. His right hand filled magically with his Colt. Then, almost as suddenly, he relaxed.

"It seems we all respected Baker Putnam," Miss Merrill said. "For our own reasons."

SHE had reined her pony close to Tabor. Now she dismounted and stood beside him. She wore a split skirt and a man's shirt open at the throat. Her skin was very white.

"He was a brave man," Tabor said.

"Yes."

She stood close to him. She seemed smaller here in the dusk and even more alluring than before. He liked the firmness of her proud mouth, the unbending grace of her throat.

"Did you know him?" she asked.

"Was it necessary?"

She shrugged.

"He stood for something," she said.

"I don't match you very well with Sutton," Tabor said bluntly.

"It's no match. I work for him. He has a huge house, you know."

"Yes, I saw it. Nice lay-out. Suppose you didn't have much choice?"

Her chin lifted angrily.

"As much choice as you had, Mr. Tabor," she said. "I'm his housekeeper. You can think anything else you like."

She turned and mounted the pony. Tabor moved toward her, then stopped.

"I'm sorry. I just find it odd, somehow. And dangerous."

"What does it matter?" Then she asked, more briskly: "Do you know where to bring Maloney?"

Tabor nodded. "If I get through."

Her brown hair brushed her cheek as she looked full at him.

"I think you will, Mr. Tabor." Her tone was enticing.

Tabor smiled. "Your confidence inspires me, Miss Merrill."

"Will you bring him alive?"

"Sutton didn't say anything about that."

"Well, I'm saying something about it now," she said, clipping her words. "Bring him alive."

She half-turned the pony, then looked back. "And incidentally, my first name is Janet."

Before Tabor could move, she turned the mount and was gone, spurring the animal down the grade.

The night, suddenly, seemed to grow blacker. The wind flared, a wet clinging wind. Rain began to fall in large, scattered drops. Tabor mounted his Claybank and headed down toward the Sheriff's office.

The first flash of lightning streaked the sky, and thunder rumbled. Tabor spurred the Claybank to a trot, threading his way expertly through the mud-ruts to where an alley way, near the base of the slope, angled behind the street front, leading to the livery stable.

None of the men keeping the vigil had noticed his shadowy form. They were, Tabor had seen, looking the other way—south. The lightning had revealed a body of mounted men moving steadily and purposefully toward the Granada City jail.

At the livery stable, Tabor left the Claybank and moved quickly in the shadows

between the buildings back to the main street. It was time to get his man.

Sheriff John Callahan stood in the street, feet planted firmly apart. He had drawn both guns, and stood with them pointing at the approaching horsemen. Leading the Vigilantes was a huge, red-headed man. He carried a carbine balanced in one hand, the barrel resting in the crook of his left arm.

THE rain came, the big drops splattering the buildings, slapping at men's faces. The wind caught it and hurled it slant-wise in the night. Another fork of lightning branched blindingly above the building tops, the thunder pealing in a roll of ugly sound. The lanterns flickered and swung in the windows of the Sheriff's office.

"Hold on, Burton," Callahan shouted. "Another foot and my men start shootin'."

The advancing horsemen slowed to a stop twenty feet from Callahan.

"Callahan," the red-head roared, "Unless you get the hell out of the way you're going to die. We aim to get what we're after."

"No matter, Burton," Callahan yelled. "We'll both die if you want foolishness. Go back to your home and let the law handle this."

"To hell with your law."

The red-head swung the carbine around and pulled the trigger. The roar of the shot filled the night. Callahan shot from both six-guns, their muzzles spouting red and blue flame. Instantly, flame and roar split the darkness.

Tabor, flat against the building, felt his hat plucked from his head. Something kicked at his boot. Just ahead of him in the darkness a man leaned forward and stayed that way, freakishly propped against the building.

Tabor ran toward the lighted office. As he reached it the lights crashed out. A man appeared in the doorway, leaning against the jamb and shooting from his hip. Tabor pulled his Colt and slashed viciously downward against the man's gun wrist. The man screamed and stepped back, tripping over the sill and falling heavily on his back.

Tabor moved inside. Two men, crouched under the windows, turned towards him. One of them crossed his gun hand over and his finger squeezed on the trigger. Tabor shot carefully, first with one Colt, then with the other.

Tabor flattened himself against the floor, waiting for the lightning to give him a glimpse of the layout. Three times lead flew inches above his head, splatting against the far wall. The lightning came, showing a small door to his right. Tabor ran for it in a crouch.

Colliding at first with part of the door jamb, he burst into the corridor beyond the small door. Unable to see anything, he stopped short.

"Maloney!" Tabor called. "Jimmy Maloney."

Maloney's voice came from about halfway down.

"Here. Here I am."

Tabor holstered his Colts and struck a match. Maloney crouched against the wall of his cell, beneath the barred window. Tabor had a glimpse of a burly man in a white shirt, string tie, a handsome triangular face glistening with sweat and white with fear. Tabor blew out the match and pulled his guns again.

"Stand near me," Tabor said.

He shot and kicked at the lock until the iron frame door gave beneath his assault. He yanked it open.

"Come on."

Maloney didn't move.

"Are you from Sutton?" he said.

"Yes."

Still the man did not move, except to press himself closer to the wall.

"I—I don't know," Maloney said hoarsely. "Sutton doesn't like me anymore."

"Move," Tabor said sharply. "I'm not giving you any choice."

At the end of the corridor there was a back door. Tabor knew it was there. It led into an alleyway that ran parallel to the street and joined the livery stable. Sheriff Callahan had been proud of it as a means of quick riding when in a hurry. Tabor used it now.

He held Maloney in the doorway, peering ahead into the darkness. Maloney breathed heavily. At their back, a pounding of feet sounded on the boardwalk, then came the crash of wood splintering. A horse screamed. Tabor stood immobile, one Colt in Maloney's ribs, the other

pointed toward the mouth of the alleyway.

Lightning brightened the sky. In its quick flash a man could be seen at the corner of the building, on one knee, his rifle pointing at Tabor's chest. Tabor shot from the hip an instant before the man fired. The man jerked back against the building, sank to the wet ground. The heavy rifle slug ripped along the side of the jail.

Tabor heaved at Maloney, and both moved out into the rain. In the shelter of the wooden awning that hung over the stable doorway, Tabor said:

"Maloney, I'd just as soon as take you where you are going dead or alive. It's up to you."

Maloney was already skin drenched, his hair matted against his white face, and he was trembling.

"Who are you, anyway?" he demanded. "Why are you doing this?"

"Name's Tabor. I'm doing it for money. What the hell do you care? You're out. Those Vigilantes aren't playing."

"Damn it, if you're taking me to Sutton, it's murder. I got a note from the—the Vigilantes. They said I'd go free if I talked, once they got me out. I'm no fool. Sutton will kill me."

TABOR barked, "Do you trust a bunch of blood-thirsty night-riders who burned their men alive the last time they caught them?"

Maloney's face froze.

"Who the hell are you, anyway? What do you know about—."

Tabor didn't make an answer. He poked the man with his gun, pushing him against the Claybank.

Maloney sucked in his breath, making a sound like a sob. He brought both arms up, knocking Tabor's gun hand to the left, and rammed his knee into the smaller man. Tabor, caught off balance, sprawled to his knees, the wind knocked out of him. Maloney drew back one foot.

It was a mistake. Tabor caught Maloney's balanced leg and twisted. Maloney screamed and went down. Tabor stood up, pressing his injured stomach and gasping for breath. Maloney rolled over slowly and tried to get up. Aiming the right hand Colt at Maloney's head, Tabor coldly pulled the trigger. The firing pin fell on an empty shell. Tabor shrugged, leaned over, and brought the Colt's barrel in a hard, raking blow down across the side of the big man's head.

He dumped Maloney like a meal-sack across the Claybank, climbed up behind him, and wheeled out into the driving rain.

Maloney was still out when Tabor reached Glenn Creek. Light glowed dimly in the window of the pine shack. Tabor heaved Maloney's body over his shoulder and struggled to the shack.

Inside was Carr Sutton and Janet Merrill. They leaped to their feet.

Tabor kicked the door shut and threw Maloney to the dirt floor with a force that sent him sprawling limply against the wall.

"There's your man, Carr," he said.

Tabor felt surprise at seeing the girl. Irritation spiced his feeling. He shrugged it off. She was just a girl, and she was with Sutton. Perhaps she did belong, after all.

"Good work, Tabor." Sutton moved around the table and looked down at Maloney. He reached into an inner pocket and brought out a small, oblong package, which he tossed onto the table. "I knew you'd come through all right."

Janet was staring with a stricken look at Maloney's form. Suddenly, she lifted her face to Tabor. Hate flamed in her eyes. Rage twisted her face. Her hands were doubled into fists.

"You fool!" she blurted, despair hoarsening her voice. "You fool! You've killed him. Now he'll never tell them."

Sutton whirled quickly to face the girl.

"Sutton is the one you want," she cried. "Sutton had them burned alive. Sutton had Putnam murdered. Maloney only helped him..."

She stopped with a choke. Sutton had her by one arm, his fingers sinking into her flesh.

"Janet, Janet," he rasped. "You are hysterical. This has been too much for you. You don't realize what you're saying..."

Tabor's hands dropped over his Colts.

"What is she saying, Carr?" Tabor asked.

"They raised her, King. She thought a lot of the Sheean boys." Sutton's heavy face assumed an injured look. "Now she

thinks I'm responsible for their deaths. That's unfair, Janet," he added, turning to the girl. "Spying on me, pretending loyalty..."

Janet pulled her arm free of Sutton's grip and backed against the wall.

"It's true," she screamed. "You found out they were working for Baker Putnam, that they had evidence against you. Maloney got a band of men for you—you led them yourself—and you burned them alive, locked in their house. But you were too late. They had already given their evidence to Putnam—evidence that would run you out of the country or see you hung. You ordered Maloney to shoot Putnam."

"You've let your imagination run away with you, young woman," Sutton yelled. "Maloney might have tried to do things in my name, but you can't connect me with any part of these regretful affairs. If you have evidence against Maloney, the place to give it is at a trial..."

Sutton was interrupted by Janet's sudden scream—a scream of horror. Tabor felt a cold touch on his spine at the sound of it, and Sutton's face froze. Tabor looked to where the girl's wide eyes were watching.

MALONEY was lurching to his feet. He leaned heavily against the wall of the shack, blood streaking his face and shirt. His eyes were the eyes of a mad puma.

Maloney looked from the girl, to Sutton, to Tabor. His look found the packet of money on the table. Suddenly, a six-gun was in Carr Sutton's hand, and Maloney tensed.

"Careful, Jimmy," Sutton said.

Maloney's lips drew back, making his whole face a sneer.

"Damn you," he said. "Damn you! You can't make me pay for everything..."

A fork of lightning leaped into silhouette against the black window pane, and the thunder made a crack like a whip beyond it. At the sound, Maloney leaped from the corner.

Sutton's six-gun spoke once. A small hole appeared between the glowing puma eyes, and the back of Maloney's head splurted blood. He dropped in his tracks.

Sutton looked gravely at his six-gun and shook his head.

"Hated to do that. Maloney was a good man, and my last real friend."

Then he looked over the sight of the gun at Tabor. His black eyes were hard. A half-smile was forming on his lips. He did not move the gun.

"There's your money, King," he said, tipping his head toward the table. "Thanks for the help."

No expression flickered on Tabor's long face. His hands relaxed over the twin Colts, moved slowly away from them. He nodded and took a step to the table. He over the edge so that the bills fluttered lifted the packet of currency, ran a thumb slightly.

A sob came from the girl. She stood pressed hard against the wall, a hand holding her bruised arm. Her hair was slapped in wet lines against her white face. She was looking at King Tabor with fear-stricken eyes. The terror and pleading in them were naked.

Tabor slipped the package in his pocket. He turned, walked to the door. He heard the girl suck her breath in sharply.

A cold, hard anger seeped through Tabor. Sutton, he realized, thought him a fool. Now, he knew himself, he had been one.

There was a click, loud in the silence, and a slight movement. Tabor dropped to his knees, flung himself back against Sutton's legs. The roar of the shot from Sutton's six-gun filled the shack.

Sutton went sailing against the pine table, upsetting it and crashing the storm lantern to the floor, extinguishing it. The two men grappled on the hard packed earth. Sutton's gun flew from his hand, clattered against the far wall. Tabor, with his leg pinned, his back to the dirt, felt

Sutton's fists pounding his head.

Lightning forked the sky through the window, and thunder sent a pistol crack echoing across the creek. The pine shack trembled with gusts of wind that flung a curtain of water in a whistling tattoo against the roof. The two men fought desperately in the dark.

Tabor twisted around, wrenching his leg free of the table, but Sutton had the advantage. Tabor could feel the big fists slamming his face with a force that pegged him helplessly to the floor. He could taste the blood in his mouth. Gradually Tabor fought free, shook himself clear of Sutton's frantic hands.

He fought with a cold, consuming hatred. He was remembering Sutton's casualness in placing the rendezvous out here in this lonely ferry shack. He was remembering the swift current of the overflowing Glenn Creek, current that could wash a man's body miles away before discovery. He was remembering Baker Putnam's quiet courage, and Janet Merrill's liking Putnam for something. He was remembering Maloney's bitter accusation, "You can't make me pay for everything." His fury mounted as he saw the pieces fit together.

SUTTON was a snarling bundle of desperation. He used his greater size ruthlessly, matching his bulk against Tabor's quick skill. He managed to burst free, and seized the table in the dark, holding it by one leg. He swung it viciously at Tabor's crouched form.

The flat top slapped against Tabor's back. He felt himself spinning across the room, then the impact of the opposite wall. There came a sharp, breath-catching pain in his chest. He tried to move, but the pain filled his head. Dimly, he saw Sutton lurch toward him. A cold hand seemed to touch the back of his neck when he realized Sutton held something small and deadly in his hand—and he could do nothing.

The thing in Sutton's hand glinted. The sleeve gun. Tabor arched himself for a kick. His boot caught the derringer the instant a spurt of orange appeared at its mouth.

Then the shots rang out clearly. Sutton's torso jerked, began to fall. There were five shots. Sutton was on the floor.

Tabor became aware of Janet against him. The trembling warmth of her body was pleasant.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Tabor nodded. He held himself against the wall as she righted the table and lighted the lantern. Then she was back, wiping blood from his face. Tears of relief made rivulets on her cheeks.

"How did you know about Sutton?" Tabor asked.

"I overheard them talking." She shuddered. "Sutton and Maloney planned it to disgrace the Vigilante movement Putnam had started against him, and to get rid of them at the same time. Then, Putnam himself threatened Sutton, said he knew about the burning. Sutton and Maloney planned Putnam's death. Sutton promised Maloney he would get him off. But he was going to kill him. I could tell."

Tabor nodded again.

"I couldn't do anything," the girl went on. "Sutton watched me. He suspected I knew. And tonight he would have killed me, too."

She looked into Tabors face, her eyes bright.

"You could have gone," she said. "You had done your job."

Tabor shook his head. Pain still filled his chest, but he felt good — buoyant. Something poisonous had been drained from him, leaving him cleaner. He had been the man for the job. But a man had to be more than that, Tabor knew now. Once, it had been that way—it had to end that way, whatever went between. A man had to stand for something.

Outside thunder rumbled again, but it was distant this time. The rain had slackened, became only a soft down settling gently in the night. A fresh, cool wind touched their faces as they stepped together from the door of the shack.

BIG SMOKE

By JOHN C. ROPKE

Only on Dragoon Range did the great, grey stallion know freedom from man. And if it were invaded? Big Smoke had plans.

THE STALLION moved slowly, his big, smoke-grey body still stiff from the night cold. His band followed indifferently, grazing lazily, moving with the dull sense of security that the valley had always afforded. For in all of the Dragoon Range, this valley alone was the only place Big Smoke and his band knew freedom from the constant threat of man.

Behind a clump of brush near the edge of the pool, Phil Cass watched in admiration. His soiled denim clothes were wet with dew, his black sombrero crushed beneath his chest, his legs sunken in the soft mud of the pool's edge. But his young face betrayed no sign of discomfort; nor did he feel any. He was only conscious of the fact that the legendary stallion was

within lariat range and coming closer.

He remained immovable, scarcely daring to breathe, feeling the slight breeze against his tanned face, smelling the horses.

And as he watched, Big Smoke stopped and nosed the air suspiciously. He snorted a low warning to his band and searched the area of the pool with sharp, alert eyes. His band halted as one, their ears forward, their eyes watching their leader for the slightest sign that there was danger.

For a full minute Big Smoke held his pose of rigid attention. With the slight breeze at his back he had only his eyes to warn him of danger. He saw nothing, but his wild sense of caution warned him of some unseen menace.

Cass studied the powerful lines of the animal, the high, long body, the deep chest and smooth muscled shoulders, the intelligent head held so proudly on the gracefully arched neck. The coat was rough and coarse, with mane and tail almost sweeping the valley floor. But Cass was picturing in his mind what the great stallion would look like after he had been carefully groomed.

Big Smoke moved then, lowering his head, and plodding forward again, sure of his ground. And even as he came forward, Cass rose above the clump of brush. He moved slowly, noiselessly, and he gambled all on one quick throw of his lariat. Big Smoke's head snapped up, and the noose settled gently over the surprised head.

For a startled second Big Smoke froze, then he charged full at the slim, lanky figure before him. Cass forced himself to hold his ground until the stallion was almost upon him, then he threw himself bodily to one side. He was on his feet instantly, wrapping both gloved hands about the smooth rope, digging his heels well into the soft ground.

Big Smoke's charge drove him into the pool. He fought his own momentum, trying to stop and turn, eager to attack his enemy once more. But the soft mud of the pool bottom afforded no foothold for his unshod hooves. He slithered forward until the taut line spun him about and knocked his legs from under him. He fell heavily, the wind knocked from him in a loud whoosh. The water rose over his head and he worked his legs frantically, trying to get a foothold on the treacherous bottom.

Cass was smiling now, his wiry body straining backward to keep the lariat taut. He hadn't expected the stallion to charge him, the unexpected attack was proving helpful. From the strain of the rope Cass knew he could never have held Big Smoke if the stallion had sound footing.

Behind him Cass could hear the rest of the band milling about in confusion. They were crazy with fear, unsure of what to do in the absence of their leader. Knee deep in muck, Big Smoke raised his head and shrilled a command. At the sound, the herd broke, scattering wildly across the valley.

Cass's heart went out to the big stallion then. He slacked the line a bit, letting the great stallion suck in great gasps of liquid air. Then Cass played Big Smoke like a giant fish on a line, carefully, gently, yet firmly. More than ever he wanted to own this magnificent animal with the gallant heart.

FOR two hours they fought in the mud of the pool. After that first insane charge at his attacker, Big Smoke went on the defensive. His only thought now was to reach solid ground and shake off the tormenting ring of burning pain that circled his neck. And through it all, the hated scent of man filled his flaring nostrils.

As for Cass, time ceased to exist. The rope had long since burned the skin from his hands, leaving his thin gloves in ribbons, revealing the raw, ugly palms. At times he was knee deep in mire, and at other times he was knee deep in the pool. He knew only that he must keep the giant stallion from solid footing. And even as he cursed the stallion's efforts to escape, he admired the spirit and stamina of the animal.

The sun was strong before Big Smoke's fighting heart gave up the battle. He stopped fighting suddenly, standing knee deep in the chill waters of the pool, mud covered, sweat stained, the powerful body admitting defeat. Then deliberately he fell on his side, letting his head sink below the water. He knew he was beaten, and Cass knew the stallion was choosing death rather than capture.

Cass plunged forward, stumbling and sliding in his haste to reach the animal.

Then, sobbing with the exertion, he lifted the stallion's head above the surface of the water. Big Smoke made no effort to help himself, leaving his dead weight for Cass to hold. And straining, bracing himself, Cass held the head up.

He talked soft, caressing words of encouragement, words that a mother might use to an ailing child. He begged, pleaded for the stallion to get up and give it one more try. And gradually the will to live came to Big Smoke. He snapped at Cass's face half-heartedly, missing it by inches, and kicked himself free of the encircling arms to stand erect. Trembling in every muscle, he staggered forward, knowing the uselessness of fighting the rope.

It was late afternoon before Cass had his first meal that day. He sat relaxed against the bole of a tree, sipping his strong coffee slowly, staring contentedly beyond the small fire at the copper-colored mirror that was the pool.

Cass had reason to be content. He was remembering the stories he had heard of this legendary horse in the past two years. Stories that had traveled to the western tip of Wyoming where he had been breaking wild broncs. Not until he knew every trick, every possible thought of his wild charges, had he allowed himself the thought of attempting Big Smoke's capture. Two years of waiting, wondering if another would beat him to it.

Now he stared at the lake and reviewed each tale of the stallion's keen intelligence. He congratulated himself the more on his luck. He had, he knew, the best darn horse in the west.

HE HEARD the distant ring of shod hooves, then he heard Big Smoke snort defiance at the valley intruders and he sensed the stallion's uneasiness. Instinctively he rolled into the brush, his right hand reaching for his six-gun. He cursed softly as his hand caressed empty leather. Dimly he remembered seeing his gun fall into the mud of the pool as he had struggled with the stallion that morning. But in his excitement of the capture of the animal he had forgotten about it.

Still cursing silently he moved back into view and waited. Being unarmed he knew there was no point in hiding in the brush. Whoever these riders were, he had to meet them openly. He refilled his coffee cup and sat crosslegged by the fire, apparently unconcerned about the approach of his visitors.

A blue jay erupted from the brush nearby, and left a trail of falling leaves to mark its excited passage through the trees. And in the wake of its disturbance, three men walked their horses into camp.

All three were range rannies, in dirty flannel shirts and sweat-stained pants.

The biggest of the three, a giant of a man, ignored Cass and eyed Big Smoke strangely. His wire-thin lips were twisted in a cruel grin, and Big Smoke fought the halter line that held him to the tree, as the man approached.

The stallion wasn't showing defiance now, his eyes rolled in fear and he fought the halter with insane fury. Cass came to his feet slowly and noticed for the first time the big man's crooked, misshapen shoulder. He sensed then that these two had met before. When Cass looked up at the man's face again, the hard eyed gent was watching him.

"That's right, stranger," he said softly, "take a good look at that useless stump of mine." He indicated the trembling stallion with a curt nod of his head. "A little present from that fool horse there."

That twisted grin came again and he turned back to the stallion. "You remember Rocky, eh? Shorty! Tex!" he snapped suddenly, "go get him!"

The two riders kneed their mounts forward and headed for Big Smoke. Cass took two long strides to the side of the big man's horse.

"What in heck you . . ."

He ducked away then as Rocky leaned over in the saddle and slashed at him with the barrel of his six gun. He felt the quick sear of flame as the gun sight raked the side of his face and he fell to his knees. He was still on his hands and knees when the gun hit him again and the hot earth beside the fire pushed into his face.

THE moon was high, and the fire was dead embers when Cass pushed himself groggily to his feet. He staggered to the side of the pool, fighting the nausea, and soaked his throbbing head in the cool water.

It was dawn before he found his own sorrel stallion at the far end of the lush valley. He had left the horse hobbled there the night before, knowing that Big Smoke would never enter the valley if he caught the scent of a strange stallion.

He found the saddle he had cached in the bole of a tree and he mounted the sorrel and rode back to the cold camp beside the pool. The tracks of the three riders were plain and Cass followed.

He rode steadily all day, almost falling from the saddle with weariness, and by late afternoon he caught sight of the party. And seeing Big Smoke following the three riders listlessly, wiped weariness from his tired frame.

It was plain now why the party had made such good time. Even though they had made no night camp, Cass had expected to find them long before this. He knew the ways of wild horses, had expected that Big Smoke would fight them every foot of the way.

Now it was plain why Big Smoke followed so quietly. A thin, strong strand of rawhide had been fashioned into a hackamore and tied about the stallion's head. Looping around the sensitive nose of the horse and coming up under the jaw bone to bite into the tender flesh behind the ears, it had taken all fight out of the animal.

The lariat was tied to the loop under the jaw bone, and every time the stallion resisted the pull of the rope, the sharp hackamore bit into the nerve centers, paralyzing the brain with shock. No horse, regardless of stamina and courage, could withstand such cruel treatment for long. Now, Big Smoke was a crushed, beaten thing whose whole attention was centered on keeping the lariat slack.

CASS'S heart went out to the stallion. It seemed impossible that any man would willingly destroy the gallant spirit of such a magnificent animal. Pitting your own strength and knowledge against the cunning of a wild horse was one thing—killing him was another.

The trail Cass followed sloped gently downhill, and it was no problem to keep out of sight behind the jutting rocks and big boulders of the twisting mountain path. And as twilight blanketed the mountain the three riders struck the foothills of the Dragoon Range.

Cass watched them dismount and spread their saddle blankets for the night. Shorty and Tex fanned out in search of wood for their night fire while Rocky, after unsaddling his own horse, approached Big Smoke. The horse had been standing with head down between spread forelegs, but when the man approached the head snapped up in a flash of its old spirit.

Cass saw the horse rear suddenly, it's unshod fore hooves boxing the air. Rocky gave the lariat a sharp, sudden yank and the stallion screamed in pain. Then the twilight was gone, and Cass cursed the darkness savagely.

It took all of Cass's will power to stay hidden in the rocks above the foothills until the riders bedded down. But without his gun there was little else he could do. He removed his worn boots and it took an hour of slow going before he reached stone throwing distance of the camp.

He could just make out the big form in the saddle blanket beside the fire from where he lay behind a clump of juniper. Shorty was sitting cross-legged on the opposite side of the fire, smoking dreamily. Tex was nowhere in sight of the camp.

Cass went forward silently, as he had suspected he found Tex with the horses a short distance on the far side of camp. The man was sitting at the base of a cottonwood, the sharp glow of his cigarette outlining his flat, ugly features.

Cass removed his cartridge belt and stole forward silently. But before he was near enough to the man to strike, Big Smoke whinnied nervously and began cutting up.

The man dropped his smoke and rose, his head to one side, listening attentively. And Cass gambled all on one wild charge. Running as fast as his lanky bowed legs would permit, he raced for the indistinct blur that was the night watch for the stallion.

Tex fired blindly, the slug ripping harmlessly through the brush to the left of Cass. And before he could fire again, Cass was on him, bringing the cartridge belt forward in a vicious arc.

The man staggered back, dropping his gun, his hands grabbing his broken face. Cass hit him with his fists then, driving him back, knocking him senseless into a

cluster of juniper. Then he turned, and going forward on hands and knees, he searched frantically for the guard's fallen gun.

His fingers touched cold metal as the stocky figure of Shorty crashed through the brush. Cass had the man outlined against the stars and he deliberately lowered his gun, firing at the rannie's legs.

He threw himself to one side as he fired, and Shorty's gun blasted at the spot where he had just been. Cass knew his own shot had missed as he heard Shorty moving about in the darkness. Rocky spoke from somewhere to Shorty's right.

"Take it easy, Shorty," he advised in that slow, unhurried drawl of his. "Hunker down somewhere and we'll wait for daylight."

There was more movement in the underbrush and then everything grew quiet suddenly as Rocky and Shorty hunkered down. Cass bellied the ground, his gun at the ready, his ears tuned to the slightest sound. The smell of damp earth and rotting leaves came to him. That, and the monotonous drone of insects blending with the rustle of the leaves.

The moon came up, casting eerie shadows, thin shafts fingering through the tree. And as the hours wore on Cass had to fight to stay awake. Several times he dozed, but each time he imagined he heard the stealthy rustling of the brush and he snapped awake. He was sure either Rocky or Shorty was circling, but he could see nothing, could not be sure.

IT WAS an eternity of waiting before the moon paled and dawn drove the night mist from the brush. Cass's eyes were heavy and his body stiff with cold.

From his position behind a rotting log he could see nothing. Behind him, Big Smoke moved nervously, and from somewhere to his left a woodpecker rapped sharply at a dead tree. There was no other sound.

Then Big Smoke whinnied in fear and Cass looked behind him to see Rocky step suddenly behind a big tree. And as Cass turned he felt the sharp sting of a slug as it nipped his ear. Shorty had seen him move and knew his position.

For a second Cass hesitated, realizing he had been trapped in their cross fire. Rocky was still out of sight and he could hear Shorty crashing through the brush. Making his decision he came to his feet like a crouching puma and faced Shorty.

Shorty had been coming forward in a low crouching run and as he saw Cass he stopped abruptly and snapped a quick shot. His shot was hurried, wild, and Cass's Colt bucked in his palm. Shorty's nose disappeared and he screamed horribly as he crumpled.

Even as Cass turned he knew he was too late. His body stiffened instinctively, bracing for the slug.

Then it happened.

The ranny who had been guarding the horses the night before groaned and stirred in the brush. Instinct acted quicker than reason and Rocky snapped a shot in the direction of the sound. The movement in the brush ceased, but the second's reprieve was enough for Cass. He raised his gun and thumbed back the hammer with calm deliberation. And then held his fire.

The excitement of the close firing and Rocky's nearness was too much for Big Smoke. He forgot the bite of the hackamore and reared up suddenly, the full weight of his powerful body snapping the leather thong. He screamed, and Cass sensed that there was more defiance than fear in the sound.

The stallion threw himself violently to one side to keep his footing, and in his anxiety to escape, he charged the thing he most feared. Rocky seemed powerless to move, fear of the charging stallion rooting him to the spot. He went down before Big Smoke's wild charge without a sound. And from the way the big man fell, Cass knew he wouldn't rise.

Big Smoke never hesitated, he disappeared into the brush and a few seconds later Cass saw him through the trees, charging up the slope of the foothills to his beloved range.

Cass watched him go with a deep sense of satisfaction. He was conscious only of a deep respect and admiration for the spirited animal. He knew he would never catch Big Smoke again. No man would. And Cass was content. He had owned, for a short time at least, the best damn horse in the west.

RUSTLER'S BRAND

By AL STORM

Into the wild Sierra Pimas range rode the reckless Arizona Ranger to meet the gunswift challenge of renegade killers lured by the brimstone stench of murder-for-cash.

ONLY IMAGINATION would have called the sky blue; it was white, hellish white and baking until the Sierra Pimas seemed to writhe in mute torment, choked by a heat that pushed down into lifeless canyons and blazed from whitened stone crags.

And he was lost. Hemmed in by the blistering stone escarpments, led on by endless aimless knife-slit canyons that wandered and twisted and criss-crossed until he gave up all hope of reaching Apache Ford by nightfall. The canyon pinched into a thicket of cottonwood trees and willows that edged a seep-spring pool and he threw himself down, drinking deep and then removing his boots and thrusting his burning feet into the icy water.

He was there when the rider broke the heat haze around a granite shoulder high on the far slope, horse foam-flecked and black with sweat. The rider, oblivious to the heat, crouched low in the saddle and belabored the mount with the free ends of the reins. They skittered down into the canyon in a high plume of dust and disappeared.

The Ranger frowned. Any rider, even that slight-framed button, ought to know better than to run a horse in such heat. And to catapult down a slope like that—it was asking for a pile-up.

More riders came around the shoulder, then, riding just as furiously, and Arizona Ranger Sonny Fairchild watched them narrowly. When they went piling down the slope after the first rider, Fairchild pulled his feet out of the water and stood up. Strong blunt fingers brushed reassuringly at the gun on his thigh.

For the Sierra Pimas were a sun-blasted strip of hell in which a man needed all the reassurance six blunt-nosed cartridges could give him. Hired killers had died here; lawmen seldom, for no lawman dared investigate the fomenting range war that was

smouldering in the Sierra Pimas. Rustling was rampant, night shootings commonplace. Faction jockied against faction, striking and retaliating with determined ruthlessness, while hard-eyed, tight-lipped strangers drifted the dim trails with guns for hire.

HERE Arizona Ranger Jeff Burnett had ridden . . . and disappeared; and here Arizona Ranger Sonny Fairchild was lost.

Hoof racket thundered along the narrow canyon, growing wild and loud; and then the first rider whipped into view, racing frantically.

Only then did Fairchild realize that it was a woman, slender, pretty, clad in a man's denim Levi's and sleeveless shirt. Her hair was caught up under an old hat. She saw him almost at the same moment and came riding toward him, beating the reins against her faltering mount.

"Shoot them!" she begged. "You've got a gun! Shoot them! Or give me your gun and let me do it!"

Her eyes were wide and glassy with terror, and the frenzied struggle for breath pushed her breasts alluringly tight against her shirt front. Sonny Fairchild picked up a sock and tried to shove a wet foot into it.

"Shoot them!" the woman cried again.

"Ma'am," Sonny began— He stopped, staring hard at the woman. An empty holstered cartridge belt encircled her waist; "Where did you get—"

A hoarse yell echoed along the canyon walls. The woman moaned faintly and reined about, fighting her horse away from the water.

"Wait!" Fairchild yelled. "I want to—" But the woman went hammering out of sight.

The Ranger took a few hobbling steps after her, then stopped, one hand still holding the sock he had been trying to don. That had been Jeff Burnett's gunbelt she was wearing, and she was scared three shades whiter than an anemic ghost. But by Boothill, he couldn't cut down on a handful of perfect strangers just because an equally strange woman asked him to—even if she was pretty.

Running horses whirled into the canyon pocket, churning it with noise and dust. The lead man, a tall, slit-eyed hombre, his nose crossed by a flaring white knife-scar, stared at the Ranger. He blared something and went right on up the canyon after the woman. Three men peeled out of the posse and stopped.

"What the blazes is the chase about?" Fairchild asked.

They eyed him and said nothing. One of them, hatchet-faced and slick shaven, with a raw, half healed gash across his forehead, rolled a cigarette while the other two drank. Then he drank while the two kept watch.

"You guys lawmen?" Fairchild queried.

One of the men grinned crookedly. "You a lawman, Franchon. An Arizona Ranger, mebbe?" he jibed, and the hatchet-faced Fanchon snarled.

And still they made no answer, Anger began building up in the Ranger. Outlaws, he decided; renegade killers brought into the Sierra Pimas by the brimstone stench of murder for cash. He started to turn away.

"Get your boots on, hombre!"

Fanchon was facing him, hand riding suggestively on his cartridge belt. The other two gripped their guns menacingly. Fairchild began pulling on his socks. He pulled on his boots and stomped around getting his feet into the feel of them.

"Get your horse, hombre," Fanchon said. "And head up that canyon after Lobo Walthers."

The Ranger masked his start of surprise. "I don't know any Lobo Walthers," he began, but the protest died and he stepped into his saddle.

They trailed up the canyon at a leisurely pace. The rattling clatter of hooves had long since died. Only the sharp spice of dust still hanging in the air giving evidence of the chase that had gone that way.

The canyon widened in less than a quarter of a mile, growing barren and baking hot as they left the trees and seepage of water.

Ranger Fairchild was riding ahead, the three following close behind. They hadn't taken his gun, but he knew that it wasn't a matter of oversight. Just one false move from him and three guns would start embroidering his back. He made certain his hands did not brush close to the holster at his side.

HE WAS heading into a sharp edged niche of branch canyon when a hoarse grunt stopped him.

"We'll wait here," he was told.

Fairchild reined in, waiting, studying the hard-case trio. Lobo Walthers, the hombre Jeff Burnett had mentioned, saying that he was heading into the Sierra Pimas to help Walthers with some rustling trouble. Lobo Walthers, whose 7-Heart spread was pitted against the half-dozen greasy-sack outfits that ringed it in. But from the looks of Walthers' gunhawk crew, the 7-Heart wouldn't be likely to holler to the law for help. But if Walthers hadn't, who had; and what had become of Burnett?

Five minutes slipped by, and then ten, and still they sat in the blistering sunlight, unshifting vigilance spearing the Ranger and holding him with mocking challenge.

After a quarter of an hour, Lobo Walthers' bunch came back into sight. The Ranger scanned the group, searching for —and then he saw her, roped across a saddle, face down. A blue-purple lump trickled blood along her forehead; her clothes were half ripped off as though she had been roughly and thoroughly searched. One shoulder and side were bared to the ogling eyes of the crew. Fairchild fought to control his fury.

Mike Fanchon crowded forward. "Damn you, Walthers! If she's . . ."

Lobo Walthers reined over swiftly, cutting his horse between Fanchon and the woman, blocking him. They sat that way, eye to eye, each man gripping the gun he was ready to draw.

"Back down, Fanchon," Walthers warned. "Back down or make your play!"

For long moments they stared, and then Mike Fanchon grudgingly backed away. "We'll settle someday," he breathed.

Walthers scowled, and then his attention veered as though he were noticing the Ranger for the first time. "My wife," he explained. "Threw herself off a cliff onto the rocks." He stopped, studying the Ranger's expressionless features. "We lost a baby son a few weeks ago and she never quite got over it, poor soul. She—she . . ."

Walthers stumbled over the words and hung his head. But beneath the down-tilted brim of his Stetson, sharp cold eyes flicked at Fairchild's features.

"She was tetched?" Fairchild asked.

Walthers nodded.

"I don't believe it!" The words burst from Fairchild without forewarning, and he saw Walthers' eyes narrow.

"He musta talked with her, Lobo," Fanchon cut in suddenly. "If you couldn't find it on her—and it looks like you damn near tore her apart lookin'—"

Walthers' face tightened. "She talk to you, hombre?" he asked. "Wanted to hide something, maybe, or deliver something for her?"

Menace was like a chill wind beating against his face, but the Ranger glared hotly. "She wanted me to kill you," he snapped. "Wanted me to do it or let her do it with my gun. Maybe I should have let her do it."

But that wasn't what Walthers wanted to know. "Don't stall, cowboy," he warned. "I'm looking for something that's damned important. Answer straight and you may ride out of this. Twist your answers or get funny and—" He didn't finish but the warning was unmistakable.

Walthers' crew began a quiet shifting, fanning out of the line of fire.

"Mister, she wasn't hardly slowed down enough to talk," Fairchild parried. "She—"

"She was in an awful hurry to meet somebody down here," Fanchon said harshly. "You or—" The hatchet-faced gunman swore suddenly and pointed.

A skinny, teen-age kid astride a shaggy pinto pony was on the canyon rim staring down at them. Even as Fairchild turned to look, the kid jerked up a rifle and squinted along the barrel.

"So you finally killed her, Lobo!" the kid screeched. "Killed my sis 'cause she was too good for ya! Killed her 'cause she never—" The rifle bellowed; lead screamed from the canyon's rocky floor.

"Get that McVey slick-ear!" Fanchon yelled. "Gun down the brat."

Men scattered as the kid fired twice more, working the old rifle as fast as he could pump. Walthers drew a six-gun and cut loose, but the range was too long. Other guns began popping. The Walthers' crew began working toward the canyon edge.

Fairchild reined about and shoved spurs into his horse, dodging and buck-jumping

through the rocks. A blob of lead cut a ribbon from his hat brim and he flinched aside, turning. Walthers had his gun lined for a finish shot. The Ranger threw himself to the off-side of his mount, riding the stirrup.

"He's making a run for it!" Walthers yelled. "Forget the kid! Get the stranger! Don't let him get away."

Fairchild whooped defiantly, digging hard and fast for his own gun, as Walthers' men turned. In that same long-drawn instant a running horse slammed him hard against the side of his saddle, crushing him. Stars gushed blinding brilliance across his sight as the side of his head caved in.

II

FAIRCHILD was lying flat on his back under the cottonwood trees back by the seep-spring when he opened his eyes. A man was standing over him letting water trickle from a sombrero onto the Ranger's face. The man stood stoney-eyed and unfriendly as Fairchild felt the knob on the side of his head.

"Sorry, Ranger," Walthers apologized as Fairchild struggled to sit up. "We didn't know who you were, and nowadays it don't pay to take chances."

Fairchild said nothing. He glanced covertly at the Walthers' bunch. There was no sign of Mike Fanchon; two or three more were missing, and the woman was gone.

"Mike Fanchon done that," Walthers said as Fairchild again explored the sticky mat just above his right ear.

Still Fairchild said nothing. They'd searched him, and good, or they'd never have found his Ranger shield on the inner side of his boot upper. Now Lobo Walthers was talking again, apologizing, inviting the Ranger to headquarter at the 7-Heart with an urgency that sharpened the Ranger's wariness. More than mere hospitality lay behind Walther's insistence.

"Where's Jeff Burnett?" Fairchild asked.

Walthers faltered. "I don't know," Walthers said finally. "Who's Jeff Burnett?" And then he leaned forward, lowering his voice to a confidential murmur. "That was the McVey kid that tried bushwhackin' us. Shows what I've had to contend with, rustlin' and shootin' and hell-raisin' till it's either fight or run. That's why I wanted a Ranger in here to see that I'm actin' within the law when I wipe that McVey buzzard-roost off the map," he said savagely. "I'm going—"

"Which way is Apache Ford from here?"

Fairchild's question stopped the rancher. He stood up suddenly, hands dangling close to his gunbelt.

"We'll go to the 7-Heart first," he said. "A man with the guts to fight makes enemies. I want you to see my side of it first before you listen to any yellow-bellied whiners in town."

Fairchild got to his feet slowly, pretending not to recognize the ultimatum. He was riding the thin line, living only because Walthers saw use for him.

THE 7-Heart ranch was settled on a shelf overlooking a high, mountain-rimmed valley. A dozen buildings and scattered corrals lay at the fore edge of a thick grove of trees.

The cavalcade moved across the valley and up to the buildings where heavily-armed, insolent eyed men lounged lazily in the shade. They eyed Fairchild with belligerent interest, and the Ranger saw several familiar countenances, bold likenesses of reward posters.

"This is Arizona Ranger Fairchild," Lobo Walthers called emphatically, sounding over-loud on the Arizona Ranger part.

Nobody moved, and Fairchild had the uncomfortable realization that his coming had long been known. Walthers rode up to the ranch house and disappeared, leaving Fairchild in the ranch yard. Fairchild gigged his horse after Walthers'.

"Stick your hoss in the corral, Ranger," a flat voice warned him. "Bunkhouse is over there."

Fairchild turned wordlessly and did as directed. Two men sauntered into the bunkhouse with him and sat down at a table to play cards. But their vigilance held the Ranger; when he walked outdoors they followed. There was still no sign of Burnett, nor the woman. He studied the ranch house covertly. She was probably there, unless Fanchon had taken her somewhere else.

It was a thought the Ranger did not like; but the whole set-up was ugly. He loafed over a smouldering cigarette, eyeing the ranch house and trying to figure out Fanchon's interest in the woman.

An hour slipped by and Fairchild began to fret under the constant guard kept over him. He moved toward the ranch house with determined intention, watching from the edge of his eye as the two guards converged upon him. He stopped abruptly, whirling on his toes, hand riding the butt of his belt gun. Caught by surprise, they glared helplessly and stopped.

"I want to talk to Walthers," Fairchild said tightly. "I don't need help to do my talkin'."

Two more gunnies came around the edge of the bunkhouse, saw the picture, and began sidling around to one side. A fifth man began walking calmly toward the Ranger, fingers brushing the edge of his holster. Taking confidence the two guards began easing their hands toward their guns. Fairchild backed slowly, his legs stiff and awkward with tension.

A woman's shrill scream ripped across the ranchyard. Men stopped moving, watching, waiting. Walthers' coarse voice boomed into the silence.

"What's the matter, Ranger? What's the trouble out here?"

Fairchild wiped his face with his sleeve. Somewhere below the barns a horse was coming rapidly across the valley.

"Well, you want something, Ranger?" Walthers challenged.

The horseman came into the ranch yard, riding hard, his horse spattered with foam. Fairchild found himself running forward, gripping the rider by the leg.

"Rustlers!" the rider yelled. "Over west of Pistol Point Rock. They're—"

"Where'd you get that horse?" Fairchild's fingers bit in, adding emphasis to his demand.

The horseman batted at his head with clenched fist. Fairchild dragged the man from the saddle.

"Where'd you get that horse?"

Walthers came running across the yard. Mike Fanchon appeared from nowhere.

"What the hell, Ranger?" Walthers raged. "I got rustlers cuttin' my stock to pieces and you keep pickin' fights with my crew."

Fairchild turned to face the 7-Heart owner. "That's Jeff Burnett's horse this hombre is riding," he said tightly. "And you said you didn't know any Jeff Burnett!"

Fanchon cat-stepped off to one side, his hatchet-face twisted with hatred as he glared at the Ranger. Walthers looked at the man locked under Fairchild's knees.

"Where'd you find that horse, Mealey?"

The man hesitated. "I found him," he said carefully, watching Walthers. "My hoss got spooked when I spotted them McVey rustlers. I managed to catch this critter and I high-tailed it here."

Walthers nodded. "There's your answer, Ranger," he said. "And I don't reckon Mealey is either a liar or a horse-thief." The rancher turned away with a bellow, "Get riding, men! Them McVeys are at it again."

Horses were saddled and ridden into the ranch yard, men appearing, ready armed, quick to answer the summons.

"COME along, Ranger," Walthers said. "I want you to see this. 7-Heart is fightin' to stay alive and I want you to know it."

Fairchild's horse was brought up, and the Ranger swung into the saddle. They sped across the valley. Men fanned out to get out of the hoof-raised cloud, and Fairchild managed to steal a glance behind. Even now, he saw, three or four 7-Heart gunnies still stayed on guard at the ranch. Something there Walthers wanted protected very badly, or were the guards there to keep something from leaving, something like an Arizona Ranger, maybe, or a woman called half-crazy.

Mike Fanchon reined over so that he was close behind Fairchild, eating his dust, but effectively blocking his vision backward.

They wound into the mountains, threading canyons and climbing steep hogsbacks.

"I've half a dozen little valleys," Walthers called, reading the suspicion in Fairchild's thoughts. "I try to keep a small herd in each one."

Then they were climbing again, spilling over a ridge and down through trees toward an open park. Cattle were there, being hazed into a compact bunch by half a dozen men.

"Gun 'em down, lads!" Walthers was yelling. "Give 'em hell!"

Half a dozen 7-Heart rifles roared from the trees. Down there in the meadow, a saddle emptied. Men yelled and veered crazily, whipping their mounts across the open toward the trees on the far side. Fanchon led the 7-Heart crew in a wild charge, rifles spitting as they raced after the rustlers.

Fairchild angled his horse, falling behind into the curtain of dust. Somewhere to his left, Walthers was yelling again. The Ranger held close to the rear of the 7-Heart bunch, to all appearances earnestly following them. But he was angling toward the spot where that rustler had gone down.

The fellow lay on his back, his shirt soaked with blood. Eyes lay half-open toward the blistering sky. Fairchild thought the man dead and swung down, but at his approach the half open eyes shifted.

"Go ahead, finish it," the bloody lips shaped laboriously. "Get your scalp-bonus, killer."

"Easy, lad," Fairchild soothed. He hunkered down so that his shadow lay across the man's face, shielding him somewhat from the heat. "You was rustlin' 7-Heart beef."

The wounded man struggled to turn his head. "Rustlin', hell. This valley's been McVey graze since I was a kid. Walthers crowded in and then hollers rustler when we try moving his stock out."

Fairchild nodded soberly. Time was short, bare minutes remaining before the McVey-rider would slip across the Big Divide.

"Ask that redheaded Ranger, if you don't believe me." the wounded man challenged. "The one that pistol-whipped Mike Fanchon. Ask—"

A gun-shot bellowed just behind Fairchild and he threw himself rolling, whipping his gun into his fist. Walthers stood a dozen yards away, gun smoking in his fist. The McVey rider shuddered and died.

"He was sneakin' a gun," Walthers said shortly. "I couldn't wait."

Fairchild jammed his gun into holster leather and caught up the reins of his mount. Walthers had effectively sealed the McVey rider's lips. Fairchild reined away and headed across the valley. Lobo Walthers galloped up beside him, the gun still held in his fist.

"What'd that hombre have to say?" Walthers quizzed.

Fairchild shrugged. "I was askin' him if he knew any Jeff Burnett. You stopped his clock before he had time to answer."

Walthers glared accusingly, but Fairchild returned the scrutiny, and Walthers slowly holstered his gun.

"They're snakes, the whole McVey clan," Walthers said coldly. "I don't want a dead Ranger on my hands."

III

THEY RODE back to the 7-Heart, quiet and uneasy before Walthers' dark scowling. The rancher glanced suspiciously at the Ranger, turned several times toward Mike Fanchon as though to speak, but always he stopped and said nothing.

"Reckon that pins it on McVey for good," Lobo Walthers said once. Fairchild didn't answer, and the big rancher glowered.

At the 7-Heart, they unsaddled and loafed, shaping cigarettes and talking callously of the saddles they had emptied. But the talk mysteriously dwindled when Ranger Fairchild neared. He entered the bunkhouse and turned, but no guards followed on his heels.

A small window opened on the far end, and he approached it to glance outside. Nobody was in sight. He turned again to watch the door. He tried the window; it opened. Engrossed in talk, the guards obviously were waiting for him to reappear through the doorway. With luck he might . . .

He eased himself through the window head first, sliding down upon his hands, rolling his shoulders and coming to his feet.

A scant twenty yards and the first of the trees swallowed him. Then it was creep and duck along the edge of the grove until he was directly behind the ranch house.

Fairchild wiped his palms on his pants, loosened the gun in its holster, and stepped out into the sunlight, walking boldly toward the building. He reached the stone step, felt the latch of the door, and then was inside. He froze, listening, the deep

thudding of his own heart sounding loud in the quiet.

He crossed the kitchen silently. A door gave to his cautious pressure, and the woman sat looking at him from the far side of the room. Her eyes widened with sudden recognition and alarm. Somewhere in the fore part of the house, Fanchon's metallic voice broke out in loud, sharp argument.

"I want to help you," Fairchild whispered as he moved toward the woman. "Don't be alarmed!"

But she wasn't alarmed, only suspicious and loathful. "What do you want?" she spat. "Fanchon or Walthers'll kill you if they find you talking to me. You're hired to murder innocent people, not to . . ."

"I'm looking for a Ranger, a red-headed, short legged fella called Burnett," he murmured. "I—"

Her lips twisted in a grimace of pure hatred. "I won't talk," she said. "Tell Lobo that. He can't force me to tell where it is. And he can't trick me. I won't tell even if he kills me."

Her vehemence startled the Ranger. "Jeff Burnett is my friend," he whispered. "I've got to find him. I—"

"Lobo!" a harsh yell echoed from outside. "That damned Ranger hombre got away and is on the prowl somewhere around here!"

Walthers' swearing rang through the house.

The woman looked at Fairchild, some of her belligerence fading. "Are you a Ranger?" she breathed. And then, before Fairchild could answer, she said hurriedly, "Oh, if only I could be sure. I—My saddle is in the barn. My quirt is hanging from the horn. Take that quirt to Hiram McVey, if you are a Ranger. I—"

"You're a damned fool, Walthers!" Fanchon's cold voice suddenly raged. "You're stringin' a rope around all our necks by waitin'! Kill him, I say!"

BOOTS thumped across the far rooms, and Fairchild headed back toward the kitchen. He eased the door to peer outside. 7-Heart gunnies were combing the trees, working across the corrals and barns looking for traces of him. He stepped out boldly, forced by the boot sounds within the house. The woman spoke, detaining Walthers, giving the Ranger precious seconds of time in which to get clear.

To skulk now would be to invite attention. He moved with casual directness toward the nearest building, hugged its edge and kept going. The muscles of his back ached with strain. A mad impulse to start running jerked at his will, screaming for him to flee.

Miraculously he made the barn and ducked inside. Three saddles were hung on pegs beside the door. From one of them a braided quirt dangled. The Ranger seized the quirt and examined it briefly, but nothing about the thing told him anything.

A horseman rode up outside and yelled, "Ask Lobo if anybody's blocked off the canyon."

Fairchild peered out. The rider was Mealey, still straddling Burnett's horse. Fairchild went out the door with a rush. His clubbed fist took the man just above the belt buckle, whooshing the breath from him. The startled horse danced away, and Fairchild dragged the renegade from the saddle. A yell raised from the ranch house.

The Ranger was in the saddle and peeling away from the corrals, riding low in the saddle and pumping his spurs. Guns raged behind him. Pocks of dirt lifted underfoot. More yelling went up, and then he was pulling out of range. But a quick look behind showed him that Walthers wasn't letting it rest there. The 7-Heart bunch were scurrying toward the barn and getting mounts. Others had ducked into the bunkhouse, and now they were reaching out for him with rifle lead.

He kept his spurs working, running the horse until the miles had twisted away in the rocky canyons and his legs were wet with foam from his laboring mount. He reined away, climbing slowly, sliding down grade and torturously working up the next, fighting his way across the rough Sierra Pimas, putting distance between himself and Walthers' gun-heavy crowd.

Four men appeared on a mountain shoulder far to the left. McVey men. Fairchild veered toward them.

"That's one of them," a shrill screech reached him. "I saw him with Lobo when he killed Sis!"

It was the teen-age McVey kid again, and even as Fairchild caught the shrill voice, the kid was lifting his old rifle.

Fairchild veered his jaded horse. Rifle lead cut across his side.

"Hell, there comes the whole damn 7-Heart bunch," one of the McVey four yelled. "Get the hell out of the way!"

A canyon wall closed them off and Fairchild felt the trap closing ominously about him. His side began to throb and he knotted his 'neckchief into the wound. Black haze swirled across his vision. He listened to sounds that weren't sounds; felt himself rise and fall in the saddle and the light grew dazzling until he closed his eyes to escape it. He gripped the saddle horn with both hands, clinging desperately. But still he kept his horse moving. If Walthers should catch him now; or that McVey kid with his hungry rifle . . .

A cold slice of moon was riding high when Fairchild opened his eyes. He was sprawled in water, his chest and shoulders riding a rough, gravelly bar, legs and lower body in the icy stream. And less than half a mile away the lights of a town showed dimly against the black hulk of the Sierra Pimas.

GINGERLY he moved, chilled, aching, and managed to get to his feet. If he'd hung to the saddle another few minutes his horse would have taken him into the town where either the McVeys or the 7-Heart bunch might be waiting. If he'd dropped a few seconds sooner, with his head in the water instead of on the gravel bar . . . His horse was nuzzling greasewood clumps close by, and he pulled himself into the saddle, feeling again the warm flow of blood seeping his side.

Most of the town was darkened, doors barred. No horses showed along the hitchrails. An ominous brooding quiet prevailed in the streets and along the darkened rows of squat shanties and houses. One saloon had a board nailed over a bullet-shattered window, but lamp light showed against the sign painted on the glass remaining: APACHE FORD SALOON. A round shouldered figure came shuffling out of the saloon and started across the street.

Fairchild called hoarsely. "There a Doc in town?"

The figure whirled around and backed away a dozen yards. He stood eyeing the Ranger for long moments before venturing an answer. "Yeah, sure. Three doors down thataway . . . where you see that light."

Fairchild kneed his horse into motion. He twisted once to see the round shouldered man staring after him. In the indicated lantern light, the Ranger slid down and stood leaning against his mount, fighting for breath as though he'd run the last ten miles uphill. The man up the street had turned and was legging it for the saloon. Fairchild dropped his hand to his gun. But he was too done in to make a fight of it. Walthers, or McVey, or unnamed outlaws, he was at their mercy; he knew it, and he turned toward the house with dragging steps.

Doc Walshmate was a bald, wasp-faced little man who brusquely ordered Fairchild to strip down and bare the wound. No questions were asked. The Doc was nervous and uneasy, but not afraid; and he made it plain that he wasn't taking sides or being friendly.

He probed a bit while Fairchild held tight to the edges of the scrubbed pineboard table. He poured liquid into the wound and taped a bandage across it.

"That'll be five dollars," the Doc said.

Fairchild looked apologetic. "I ain't got five cents now, Doc, but I'll drum up something in a day or two and settle with you."

The Doc shrugged, rolling down his sleeves as though the whole routine was old stuff to him. Feeling refreshed and a little stronger, Fairchild begged enough dry tobacco to roll a smoke.

"What'd Walthers' kid die of?" he queried.

The Doc looked around. "Walthers ain't got no kid 'nd never did have 's far as I know."

"Then she wasn't crazy," he swore. "That was just an alibi he used, and that damned quirt must really mean something after all."

The Doc stirred, jarred by Fairchild's bitterness. "Who's crazy? What you mumbling about?"

"Lobo Walthers' wife," Fairchild said. He feigned an interest in his cigarette, but the edge of his eye was evaluating the Doc's change of expression. "She ain't crazy."

The little Doc snorted. "The hell she ain't. No woman in her right mind would marry that—' He stopped abruptly as

though gagged, throwing a bitter glance at Fairchild. "All right, tell Lobo what I said," the Doc snapped. "I brought Wanda McVey into this world, but not to marry Lobo Walthers! She oughta known that marryin' her was just a Walthers' scheme for gettin' hold of McVey land, and when that didn't work, he'd try . . . Get out and let me get some sleep!"

"I'll take him, Doc," a smooth thick voice said. "I want to talk to him a little."

The Doc and Fairchild whirled. A tall, droop-shouldered, old cowman leaned against the door he'd eased open. A gun dangled in the man's veined fist, barrel down, but his eyes were chipped blue metal, watchful, keen, and a silver badge gleamed against his worn old vest.

"We'll just stroll down the street to my office, Mister," the old lawman invited. "There's a lot to talk about."

THEY walked the hushed little town, side by side, but with the grizzled old lawman two steps behind.

"Old Hiram McVey says Walthers killed Wanda," Sheriff Grizzly Mason said quietly, his gun still dangling in his fist. He speared Fairchild with chilled blue eyes. "Young Hike McVey claims he winged Walthers' newest gunny when he spotted him out in the hills."

Fairchild squirmed uneasily. Grizzly Mason might be swinging his shield to protect either side, or the old lawman might be playing his string straight and tight down the middle. It was hard to tell. Fairchild was slow to answer.

"That woman ain't dead," he said slowly. "She just got banged on the head."

The lawman grunted, his face showing little of the wrath that burned him. But that little, Fairchild saw and he grinned. "Ever hear of an Arizona Ranger around here—a red-headed cocky little squirt?"

"Jeff Burnett?" The lawman's eyes narrowed. "Walthers called him in and he's staying out to the 7-Heart trying to get the goods on McVey. He sneaked into town about two weeks ago, said he was on the trail of something that would blow this country wide open. He . . ." The sheriff stopped abruptly. "What do you know about that Ranger, Mister, if you ain't a Walthers' gunny?"

"I know Walthers denied ever knowing any Jeff Burnett," Fairchild mused. "And yet his wife was wearing Jeff's gunbelt and a Walthers' ranny was ridin' Jeff's horse."

The sheriff waited, listening closely, and Fairchild decided to lay his cards on the table. The old sheriff holstered his gun and shoved out his hand.

"How does Walthers stack up with you?" Fairchild's tones were brittle with his feelings for the man, and the sheriff eyed him.

"The way a man treats his wife doesn't make him a rustler or a bushwhacker, Fairchild," the sheriff said. "Walthers is rough, but bein' rough ain't bein' outside the law. I've a posse lined up for the day I can clean this thing up, but I've got to wait. The law can't play favorites; it's got to know. Walthers has crowded McVey, sure, but that doesn't mean he's everything McVey is callin' him."

The Ranger didn't answer. Grizzly Mason obviously hated Walthers' guts, but he just as obviously was leaning over backward to be fair, to give Walthers the benefit of every doubt.

"Burnett was gettin' the proof I need to act on," the sheriff growled. "Old Hiram McVey says that he will bring me proof that Walthers is usin' rustlin' and murder to wipe out the hill outfits so's he can step in. Maybe so, maybe no. But I can't call the hand without I got something to call with."

The Ranger was feeling stronger, and with the return of strength came impatience. He got to his feet. "I'm not waiting for somebody to bring me proof," he said. "I'm going looking for it. Jeff Burnett is either alive or dead. I'm going to find out which. And why. And maybe more, like what Walthers was lookin' for when he searched his wife out there in that canyon with half his crew lookin' on."

Grizzly Mason shook his head. "Ride easy, lad. There's a dozen rifles coverin' every trail these nights. It ain't wise to—" But Fairchild was out on the street without listening.

"I'll finish the skunk this time for sure," a shrill voice was raging from down the street. "Just let me get sights on that woman-killin' son . . ." And Fairchild recognized the rate-ridden voice of young Hike McVey.

IV

A HANDFUL of men were standing in the street in front of Doc Walshmate's, and Fairchild held to the shadows. The men were examining the blood-streaked horse and arguing among themselves. One of them walked up and knocked on Doc Walshmate's door.

"Hell, here's Wanda's quirt, I'll bet a shirt!" young Hike McVey yelled. "Sure's Walthers's a skunk it is!" The man turned away from Doc's door and ran back.

The shrill excitement brought Sheriff Grizzly Mason to his door. He saw Fairchild hugging the shadows, and the armed McVey bunch in the street farther down.

"Keep out of sight until I can explain you to Hiram McVey," the sheriff warned quickly. "One sight of you now will start this town blowing apart."

"Keep quiet about me being a Ranger," Fairchild hissed. "I want to play this my own way."

The sheriff nodded. He stepped to the outer edge of the light pool that played from his open door.

"Hiram," he called. "Hiram McVey, come here. I want to see that evidence you promised to bring me."

The group around the horse turned. A tall, lanky shouldered man shook his head. "Later, Mason. We got us a skunk in a log right now. I'll . . ."

Sheriff Mason's voice grew hard. "You're stalling, man! If you've got any proof I want to see it now! Otherwise I'm clearing the streets!"

"I've got it!" old McVey snapped back. He headed toward the sheriff, working and twisting at the braided quirt Fairchild had left hanging on his saddle horn. Turning his head, McVey shouted, "That Walthers' skunk must be around Apache Ford somewhere. Scatter out and run him to ground. I'll confab with Mason. But I want to be in on the kill!"

Fairchild eased farther back into the darkness. He had no quarrel with old McVey yet, but the old hellion was tromping the fine edge, ready and eager for a show-down come hell or come highwater. Until he could learn what had happened to Jeff Burnett, and who was gouging who, Fairchild wanted to keep out of the feud.

"Wanda braided a paper in her quirt handle," old McVey was saying. "She told me to look for it. She—"

A low whistle sounded along the street, and the McVey bunch froze.

"7-Heart comin', Hi," a voice warned.

The McVey crew faded off the street. Sheriff Mason began running toward old Hiram McVey who stood grim and resolute at the edge of the street.

"Not yet, Hi!" Mason shouted. "Don't start—"

Walthers' gun-pack boiled down the street in a flurry of rising dust. Almost immediately the blood-spattered dun was spotted at the hitch-rail in front of the Doc's.

Lobo and Mike Fanchon reined in, the rest of the men scattering along the street, eyeing the shadows as they waited, guns open in their hands. Lobo Walthers slid down and began pounding on Doc's door.

"A skinny young stranger stop here and get a gunshot wound dressed, Doc?" Walthers blared when the Doc finally opened the door.

The Doc didn't answer. He eyed Walthers, looked at the Walthers' gun-crew fanned out along the street. Walthers snarled, "Answer me, damn it! Was he here!"

"That is something I can't say," Doc said sternly. "Who comes to me for treatment and why. You'd better get your men cooled off, Walthers. This town is about fed up with . . ."

Walthers' fist darted out and grabbed a handful of shirt. His other fist smashed into Doc's face.

"Now talk, you scrawny little runt!" Walthers panted. "Talk or I'll beat you to . . ."

"Drop him, Walthers!"

Fairchild whirled. Old Hiram McVey had stepped out into the open, his rifle raised. Hellfire burned wickedly in the old man's eyes, glinted and shone in the moonlight.

WALTHERS froze with his fist drawn back. Then slowly he released his hold and Doc sagged down.

"There's your proof, Mason!" Hiram McVey shouted. "Look how your honest, honorable big-time rancher treated the Doc! And if that don't convince you that

Walthers is a skunk, I've got the evidence that Wanda sent me—"

At mention of evidence, Walthers whirled, throwing himself aside and snatching his six-gun. Hiram McVey leaped farther out into the street, intent upon getting a clear shot at Walthers. Fanchon whirled and cut loose, his shot throwing old McVey to his knees. A wild shrill yell rang from young Hike McVey's throat and hell broke loose in the street. A dozen McVey guns roared and spat, scissoring the street with a deadly hail. 7-Heart men screamed and swore, sagged limp in their saddles or reined wildly about, churning up dust and spraying lead at the muzzle flashes flanking them.

Grizzly Mason leaped toward Hiram McVey as the old rancher struggled to his knees. Lead poked the dust at his feet. The old rancher went down again, and Mason crouched over him, gun drawn.

Then the sheriff was stiffening, hunching low over his indrawn belly. He toppled stiffly forward. Fairchild leaped toward him. A man was screaming. Horses shrilled and reared, and then the 7-Heart bunch was fighting its way out of town.

A sheet of paper was clinched in Hiram McVey's fist, the edge of it still under the frayed strands of the partially unbraided quirt handle. Fairchild tugged at it and the paper tore. He tried to read it there in the moonlight. Part he could recognize as Jeff Burnett's writing, part was in a feminine hand, but the sheet made little sense, torn the way it was.

"There's that damned coyote!" Hike McVey's shrill voice raged. "He's got Mason!"

Fairchild threw himself rolling as a dozen McVey guns opened up. Lead burned a brassy taste in the air as it pecked at him. He kept rolling, then jerked half upright and dove for the darkness of the vacant lot south of the sheriff's office. A horse snorted and trotted away a few yards. Fairchild made for it blindly. He swung up and went pounding back toward the alley, giving the animal its head. Shots sounded behind him, lead snapping into an adobe wall close by his shoulder.

He slowed to edge along a dark side street. Men were yelling now, calling from darkened windows and unlighted doors.

"Walthers and the 7-Heart killed the sheriff!" someone's voice boomed. "One of the killers is still in town!"

A door was thrust open and light shone full upon the Ranger.

Giving his mount its head, Fairchild hunched low and charged through the town with reckless speed. The open country stretched before him, broken and shadow-dappled in the moonlight. And behind, the McVey crowd and half the male force of Apache Ford came spurring like fury.

Fairchild's borrowed horse seemed to know where it wanted to go and he gave it free rein, letting the animal run. Mountain walls rose high on either side, rock chopped and broken into twisted canyons and high bluffs. His side began bleeding again, draining the strength from him. He slowed finally, fighting to stay upright in the saddle. To fall now would be to leave Wanda Walthers to the full fury of her husband's wrath.

"You hit bad, Jodo?" a voice called almost at his elbow.

Fairchild stiffened, peering at the rifle guard who had risen from a shadowed shelf of rock.

"Recognized your hoss, Jodo, or I'd a cut loose on ya," the guard said. "You shoulda sung out when you came into this canyon."

Fairchild nodded, keeping his head bowed so that no moonlight got to his face. He kneed his mount on, riding up the canyon. So far his luck had been phenomenal, but ahead . . .

"Jodo," the guard called suddenly. "Hustle along. Tell Walthers that there's a slew of men heading this way. Looks like he's finally busted things wide open."

A growing murmur of running horses gave undercurrent to the air. The Ranger lifted his spent mount to a faster pace. He didn't want to be caught in the narrow canyon when the McVey bunch stormed Walthers' hideout.

A RIFLE snapped from the canyon behind him as he cut into the valley holding the 7-Heart. He reined into the trees and followed them around the rim of the valley. A man shouted from the ranch buildings. The racketing gunfire from the canyon was dying, giving way to the sound of running horses again, and then men

were spilling into the open and heading across the valley toward the 7-Heart. Almost instantly a lone rifle began pegging shots from the ranch house. Other rifles took it up from the bunk house, from the barn. It began to appear that Walthers had been waiting, had left the lone rifle guard in the canyon to the mercy of the McVeys while he settled to defend the 7-Heart.

The McVeys scattered before the rifle fire, sending a hail of lead against the ranch house. Fairchild dropped from the saddle and ducked across the yard on foot. Walthers' wife would be somewhere in the house. And so would Walthers.

Easing the kitchen door open, he cat-footed inside, gun palmed low and close against his side. Men were swearing somewhere in the fore part of the building. Guns clattered and roared. The Ranger eased a door open and edged along a hallway. He saw a door, a rope tied around the knob and stretched across the hall to tie around that knob, securing both doors.

She'll be in one of them, he reasoned, and maybe so will Burnett . . . if he's still alive.

Walthers' hoarse swearing rose loud. "Half the damn county's out there. Instead of pitchin' into the McVeys like I planned, they're set on cleanin' us out! That damned Ranger and that damned double-crossing woman—"

Fairchild untied the rope and opened one door. A quick glance showed him that the room was empty. He crossed the hall. She was inside, her face strained and white, blue fist marks showing plain about her swollen mouth. At sight of Fairchild, gun in hand, her eyes opened wide.

"You—you didn't try to get away! It was all a trick, and now you're going to—"

"I'm not," he said softly. "I'm looking for a friend, Jeff Burnett. You were wearing his gunbelt when I saw you this morning. I got your message to town, but I came back to find out about Jeff."

"The Ranger?"

Fairchild nodded.

"He's dead," she said vehemently. "Lobo and Mike Fanchon killed him when he found out that they were doing the rustling and murdering they were blaming on the McVeys." She stopped talking as a wave of rifle fire rang furious and deadly. "They—they'll kill Lobo, won't they?" she whispered when the din had subsided.

The Ranger nodded. "Probably," he said. "The 7-Heart bunch is outnumbered three to one. Seems most of the country here'bouts is convinced now as to who's behind the deviltry that's been goin' on."

The woman looked puzzled. "Then Jeff was killed for nothing? He—" She saw Fairchild eyeing her, and she blazed, "Jeff Burnett was the only man on 7-Heart who treated me decent. He pistol-whipped Fanchon when Mike tried mauling me. Lobo Walthers just stood back and laughed. Then when they found out that Jeff wasn't fooled by their tricks—"

Fairchild reached out suddenly and took her by the arm. "Walthers blames you for what happened, too. He'll come back to settle with you when he sees that he is doomed. He'll . . ."

A hoarse bellow of rage rang along the hallway. Fairchild dropped the woman's arm and jumped back. Walthers and Fanchon were in the doorway.

"You double-crossing little chit!" Walthers swore. His gun raised and swung on the woman. Fanchon was already in the room and leveling on Fairchild.

The Ranger kicked a chair against the woman and sent her staggering. In that same instant he bowed and wheeled, his own gun, coming forward and jarring with a frenzied string of shots. Walthers coughed and grunted as lead chewed into his lungs. Fanchon was shooting then, his lead knifing into Fairchild's whirling body and wiring it with pain. Walthers grabbed the sagging barrel of his gun with his left hand in an effort to raise it. Then the Ranger was pumping his last shot into hatchet-faced Mike Fanchon.

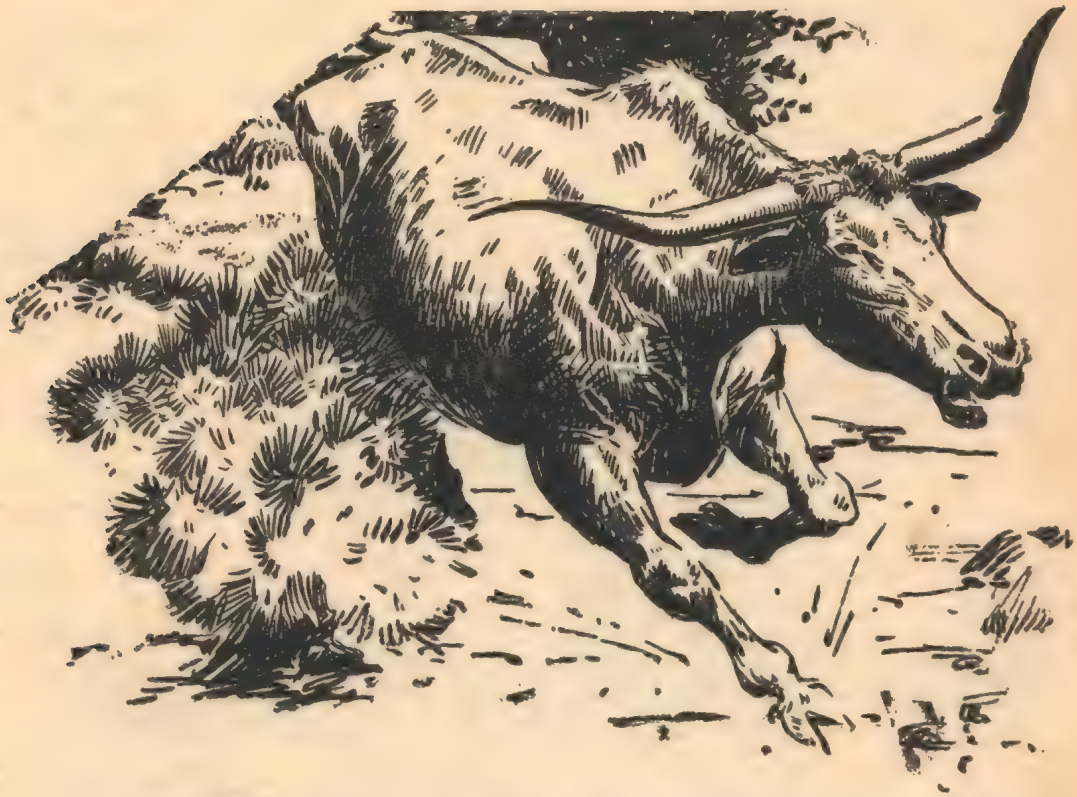
It was fast, quick and deadly, spreading over less than a dozen seconds.

"Come on," Fairchild urged as the woman stood staring. "We'll hole up until this is over, then we'll talk. But for now . . ."

Dazedly she moved to join him, and outside the racket swelled into the grim finale of Lobo Walthers' bloody scheming.

LONGHORN DESTINY

By Ruel McDaniel



There was deep mystery about the strange gunnie who took up with the trail-herd crew. But there was little doubt that he was right hombre to pit against loud-talkin', free swingin' Putt Horsby.

JOSE FLORES cleared off the tailboard of the chuck-wagon, adjusted the plank "legs" to give it more firmness, and pulled himself with his hands palm-down to a flat sitting position. His right leg, in a high laced boot, swung down from the knee. A wooden leg buckled onto a stub above where the left knee should have been, pointed out grotesquely.

Sitting here on the tailboard of the wagon in the quiet dusk after supper had been served and the dishes cleared away was a sort of ritual with Jose. He enjoyed sitting there puffing meditatively on his cob pipe and watching the cowboys and the horse-wranglers go about their chores of bedding down the trail herd—and keeping a sort of self-adopted paternal eye on young Henry Turner, kid member of the trail crew.

Not that Henry needed any particular help from anyone, old Jose told himself proudly. That seventeen year-old yonker was doing a man's job and he asked no favors from anybody, much less Putt Horsby, who seemed to delight in reminding the boy that he wasn't yet old enough to shave and should have stayed home with his women-folks.

A commotion down by the remuda brought Jose out of his reverie. He saw two or three of the boys trotting that way. Jose let himself down and hobbled toward the center of the excitement.

He heard Putt Horsby's bellowing voice before he saw what the disturbance was. "Aw, why don't you high-tail it back to Bexar County afore I forget myself and stomp you into the ground!"

Jose saw now that it was Henry Turner he was talking to. The rest of the crew was standing around in silence.

"You've been picking on me since the day we moved this herd out of the cane-brakes of Bexar County," tall, gangling Henry was saying, "and I'm dang-busted tired of it! Sure, I'm doing a man's job. And I can do man's fightin' too!"

John "Barleycorn" Light rode up at this moment, and Jose sighed with relief. "Break it up!" the trail-boss snapped. "Putt, lay off the kid. And Henry, don't be so touchy. We got a long way to go yet and maybe plenty fightin' ahead. We can't be scrappin' amongst ourselves!"

Jose hobbled back to his chuck-wagon and piled some cow-chunks on the fire to keep away the mosquitoes. Out there on the open prairie over a thousand Texas longhorns, from three to seven years old, munched the knee-high grass or slowly milled about it in preparation for bedding down. It was the time of day which old Jose, wise to the ways of the long trail, always enjoyed.

Red River Davids was instructing Cotton Billings and Putt Horsby to ride guard till midnight, when he and Henry Turner would relieve them. Tom Dry was circling the hobbled trail horses and quieting them down to steady grazing for the night.

The camp was on edge because a rider from another trail herd, a day's drive ahead, had ridden in a couple of hours before sundown and warned Barleycorn Light that the Choctaws had halted their herd and demanded "chuck-away." It had cost the crew fifty steers before the Indians would permit the herd to proceed.

Barleycorn Light had sworn that no Indian would get chuck-away from his herd, even if he had to fight. Rumors had come down the trail that the Choctaws were in a nasty, demanding mood.

JOSE saw the rising dust before he made out the rider. He followed the moving dust-finger floating up from behind the horseman until the man was within two hundred yards of the trail camp. By now somebody had given the word. When the stranger rode up, he faced two Colts and a rifle.

"Who's in charge here?" the man asked. Jose hobbled out to where the man had been stopped by Barleycorn and the other men. He saw a man of around thirty-five, sitting straight as a Choctaw in his saddle. Piercing black eyes looked out from under heavy black brows. He sat his saddle with an alertness that reminded Jose of a cougar.

"I'm trail boss," Barleycorn Light boomed.

"Thought I'd better warn you that an Indian raid's due tonight. Better alert your camp. They struck a herd up on Big Caney last night. Messed it up pretty bad. Stampede."

Light thanked him.

"Looks like you're short-handed," the stranger added. "How about pitching in with you? I've had some trail experience."

Barleycorn gazed at the stranger a minute, then exchanged glances with Tom Dry and Putt Horsby. "We do need a couple more men. Only seven hands with a thousand head. Spreads us pretty thin."

"I think he's a renegade scout for the Indians, Boss!" Putt warned contemptuously.

Jose saw the stranger stiffen. "Coming from a maverick who don't know beans that's pretty strong pow-wow!" the stranger snapped. "Want me or not?" he rasped at Barleycorn.

"He'd make a good hand," young Henry Turner added.

"I vote for him," Jose added. Anything that Henry wanted, he wanted too.

"What's your moniker, stranger?" Light asked, his voice friendly. "Seems I've seen yore face some place."

The man grinned for the first time, showing even white teeth. "Suppose you just call me Black Jack." His grin widened and Jose saw a faint apology in his black eyes. "I 'bout as well tell you before I go any farther, I've been hittin' the owlhoot trail quite a long time so I guess if I look familiar you have me mixed up with somebody else."

"What the hell!" Barleycorn exploded, "I met some pretty square owlhooters in my time. You're on the payroll. Sixty dollars and found. Bonus at trail's end. Suit you?"

"Right," Black Jack said. "Want me to take first watch?"

"We'll see. Now, meet the boys," the trail boss said. He pointed to the crew and called out their names. When he pointed to the gangling boy, Black Jack grinned. "And this is Henry Turner?"

The men exchanged glances. "Right," Barleycorn mumbled.

The stranger dismounted and shook hands with Henry. "Nice to see you, feller!" he glowed. Putt Horsby spat a streak of amber at an imaginary cuspidor near Henry's feet.

Black Jack turned to Putt. "Look, Horsby, either your aim or your judgment is rotten. Watch where you empty your mouth!"

Putt spread his thick, snuff-caked lips in a wide grin. "I warned you, Boss. See? Tryin' to rule the roost already!" He turned his small eyes to Black Jack. "Mister, my aim's perfect. So's my judgment. Want to make any corrections?" His hands dangled just above his gun-butts.

"Break it up! Break it up!" Barleycorn roared. "We got a job to do. You'll probably get yore belly-full of scrappin' 'fore we bed down in Abilene. I don't want any trouble outer you, Black Jack. Remember that."

"Sorry, Boss," Black Jack said meekly.

Putt Horsby yanked at his pants-waist and adjusted his belt. Jose thought he detected an effort by Putt to conceal the ornate Mexican peso buckle on his belt, and that puzzled Jose. Usually Putt made a to-do about that belt buckle and showed it off at every chance. Sometimes he intimated in his bragging manner that he had taken it from a greenhorn who failed to show him and his six-guns the proper respect.

Barleycorn Light told his straw boss, "Red River, you keep an eye on camp till midnight, then turn in and Black Jack'll take the watch with Henry."

Cotton Billings and Putt Horsby roped their rested mounts and set out to ride circle on the herd till midnight. The longhorns, now fairly docile from three weeks on the trail, were gathered in a rough circle about three hundred yards wide. Barleycorn believed in keeping a tight herd, though tightness made stampeding easier.

Cotton and Putt headed around the herd in opposite directions, riding well back from the outer rim of resting cattle, so as not to disturb them. They would keep up that steady circle, squinting through the darkness for any old mossback which might chance to stray from the herd and guarding against possible outside disturbance. They both were experienced trail-drivers and went about their task methodically, expertly.

JOSE was suddenly wide awake. He sat up on his bunk in the chuck-wagon and listened. In the distance he heard the snap of a rifle shot. He slammed on his hat and climbed down out of the wagon.

Barleycorn and Red River Davids lay stretched out by the smoldering coals of the campfire. A few feet from the fire, Jose saw Black Jack sit up. "Boss!" he heard Black Jack yell, "somebody's monkeying with the herd!"

Three more rifle shots blasted the night.

Barleycorn roared, "You, Black Jack, Henry and Cotton, circle the cattle. Tom, you come with me!" The trail boss and Tom set off in the direction of the firing. They each carried a Winchester and a pistol.

Jose climbed aboard one of his two chuck-wagon mules and rode bare-back behind Henry Turner and Black Jack as they began circling the restless herd.

"Indians!" Jose heard Black Jack shout. "Coming up behind the herd!"

Jose could see the flashes from the gunfire now, and he heard the sound of hoofs and horns cracking against each other.

Riders pushed their mounts back and forth around the cattle. If one lead steer made a break, a thousand cattle would turn into a wild headlong horde of flying hoofs. Jose watched closely for the first sign of a break.

He heard rifle sounds now closer and guessed it was Barleycorn and Red River returning the fire of the Indians. More guns exploded back in the timber near the river they had crossed only a few hours before.

"Choctaws trying to stampede the herd. No fight," Jose muttered. Only his gray mule heard. "They'll demand chuck-away."

The rifle fire finally ceased. By expert circling, the hands had prevented a stampede. The nervous critters had stopped milling now.

Barleycorn and Red River rode back. All but Cotton Billings and Putt Horsby came in at Light's signal. These two were on the first night circle and would stay on the job till ordered off or relieved.

JOSE'S pan of sow-belly filled the air with an appetizing aroma. Bacon and fried beans, with a two-gallon coffee pot, were ready and waiting for the crew at the first show of dawn. The rest of the men were eating when Putt and Cotton rode up from the last guard.

Jose noticed that most of the men were quiet, some even sullen. He guessed why. Some of the hands had been against Barleycorn's hiring Black Jack. They figured Black Jack had something to do with the attempted stampede.

Putt made his feelings known. "Now, Boss, what you think of yore new rider? I mean Mister Black Jack?"

Black Jack lowered his tin coffee-cup from his lips and set his plate on a prairie-dog hill. He got up slowly.

"With me, a man's square till he proves otherwise," Barleycorn answered.

"I guess the Indians rode in last night right after him just by accident!" Putt glowered.

Every man had stopped eating, watching Putt and Black Jack. Jose hobbled over to Henry.

"He was with me all during the shooting," Henry declared, "and he made a good hand. If he'd been in on the deal you think he'd have tried to keep the cattle from breaking?"

"You keep yore dirty nose outer this!" Putt roared at the boy. "This here's man's talk!"

Black Jack walked toward Putt. His spurs jingled lightly as they struck against stubble and gravel. His hands swung ominously at his sides.

"The hombre that says I had anything to do with that raid last night is a liar," Black Jack said, his eyes on Putt Horsby.

Putt threw his coffee-cup down and started for Black Jack.

Putt's fist hit out at the black stubble on the man's face. It jarred Black Jack backward. Before he gained his balance, Putt shot a left to his stomach. Black Jack doubled up and Putt's knee caught him under the chin.

Black Jack landed on his seat.

Putt lumbered in and the toe of his right boot slammed out for Black Jack's chin.

Black Jack saw it coming in time to half-roll. The boot grazed his cheek. Black Jack grabbed and twisted. Putt yelled and went down.

Black Jack struggled to his feet, and brushed the back of his hand across his eyes.

Putt lumbered to his feet and swung a haymaker. Black Jack weaved to one side and the miss threw Putt off-balance. Black Jack's right caught him just below the left ear as he passed. The big man stumbled and almost fell.

Black Jack's fist slammed down on Putt's thick neck. Putt groaned and seemed powerless to regain his balance.

Black Jack slammed his right fist into Putt's mouth. Putt bellowed. Blood spurted from broken lips.

This blow straightened him up, but it left him dazed. Black Jack threw another right to Putt's chin.

Putt flopped to his face. His heavy breathing was loud upon the quietness.

"All right, boys. Break it up. Finish your breakfast. Jose, douse Putt with a bucket of water," Barleycorn roared. He turned to Black Jack, a half-smile breaking the reddish gray whiskers around his broad lips. "Purty good scrap, feller," he murmured. "I swear, you still look familiar," he added, shaking his head slowly.

THEY hazed up the herd and were under way by sunup. They lost a day crossing Red River, and delivery date in Abilene was drawing close. Grass was luscious and nearly waist-high in the low, rolling valleys. The cattle were in good shape, and Jose knew that Barleycorn would push them hard today. Twenty, mebbe twenty-five miles.

About ten o'clock, Jose saw riders approaching. He grunted as he saw all but one of the riders were bareback. *Choctaws!*

When they saw the chuck-wagon, the leader, riding a saddle and wearing range clothes, halted them momentarily. Then they veered to the left and followed a shallow draw around Jose.

Jose stopped his team under a blackjack tree, stood up on the dashboard and craned his neck to see over the canvas cover of the wagon.

He saw the point of the herd, no more than a half-mile back, the tan backs of the steers spread out for another mile. Barleycorn Light was up at the point, and it

looked to Jose like Black Jack was riding near-point on the left and Henry Turner on the right.

Jose saw the Indians veer back again and head for the point of the herd. He limped down and unhitched his off mule, tied the other to the tree and prodded the mule back toward the herd, his Winchester across the crook of his left arm.

The Indians halted as one about a hundred yards in front of Barleycorn. Then the leader rode on down. Jose jabbed his heels into the flanks of his lazy wagon-mule, and the critter switched his shaved tail and refused to budge out of a slow trot.

leader of the band as they circled him. Now, the man was gesticulating to Barleycorn Light with slow, lazy motions of his hands and shoulders and now Jose knew. It was Pete Johnfoot, renegade half-breed. He was becoming an outrageous tradition in this section of the Indian Territory—stopping trail herds and demanding heavier and heavier chuck-away under threat of leading warriors against the herds and the drivers. The U.S. Cavalry at Fort Sill had made several forays into the western territory, looking for Johnfoot and his followers but they had been unable to corner him.

Last year when Jose came up the trail with a Gonzales outfit the drivers had been forced to give up one hundred head as chuck-away to the Johnfoot gang.

"Hell, no!" Jose heard Barleycorn roar. "This is free country. I'll pay no toll, no chuck-away, no 'wo-haw' to you or anybody else. Now clear your renegades out of here before I turn my boys loose on you!"

Johnfoot made motions with his shoulders. "Hot words, they no make compadres out of red men. Red men want only few steers for hungry squaws. Say ten times ten head. That would be cheap way to keep braves out of herd—tonight."

Jose thought he had recognized the Barleycorn's handle-bar mustache quivered. He reached for his long, pearl-handled .45. "You get yore stinkin' carcass out of the path of these cattle—before I shoot it out!"

Johnfoot grinned. "Hot head today, maybe in cold ground tomorrow," he murmured. He turned his horse and galloped back to his followers.

Black Jack rode up in time to catch the end of the conversation. His face wore a dark scowl. "Pete Johnfoot again, eh? That varmint's getting a little too bold lately, I'm thinkin'."

"They'll really stampede us tonight!" Barleycorn muttered. "This explains last night's little foray. That was just a warning, to get us ready for today. Tonight will be the real thing. But by crickets I'll see every critter stampeded over a bluff 'fore I'll pay that renegade."

He signaled the riders below. "Push 'em!" he yelled. "Back to yore grub-cart, Jose! We got a long way to go before beddin' down time tonight."

They made twenty-one miles by dusk. The cattle were trail-weary and hungry. When the point riders called a halt a couple of hundred yards short of Jose's chuck-wagon the cattle were willing enough to start grazing and looking for bedding-down ground.

As the boys changed horses and led their fresh mounts up to the camp, Jose noticed

that Black Jack was not among them. He saw Putt Horsby following Henry Turner by a few yards, and a sudden fear ran through the old cook. If Putt saw Black Jack was absent, he would be sure to vent his spleen on Henry.

"WHERE'S yore fancy rider?" Putt asked Barleycorn through swollen lips.

"If you mean Black Jack, I don't know. He was riding behind me all day. He just dropped out of sight." Jose read a vague apology in the trail boss' voice.

"Good riddance!" Putt spat. He toyed with his peso belt-buckle.

"It's a matter of opinion!" Henry put it. "And he'll be back. You wait and see."

"Why don't you dry up!" Putt snarled at Henry. "Some day I'll get a belly-full of yore palaver. When I do—Well, stay outer my way, baby-face. That's all!"

"Cut it out. All of you!" Barleycorn snapped. "Everybody rides tonight. Them danged redskins are sure to raid. We got to be ready for 'em."

A mounted rider made a silhouette on the ridge and galloped leisurely toward the camp. "It's Black Jack!" Henry shouted. "I told you!"

Black Jack tied his mount and strode quietly up to the fire. He tossed a red moccasin at Barleycorn, then helped himself to beans and salt pork. The others were already eating. When he started to pour his coffee, Tom Dry yelled, "Man at the pot!" and nearly everybody laughed. Black Jack grinned sheepishly. He took a dish-rag to hold the handle of the big pot and poured each hand another cup, as was cow-camp custom.

Barleycorn held the moccasin in his hand, turning it over and over slowly. Finally he pitched it to Jose. "For yore jewelry chest, Jose!" he laughed.

Jose caught it with one hand. His smile spread across his wrinkled, drawn face. He hobbled over to the metal chest nailed to the front of the wagon and dropped the moccasin in the box with the extra ammunition, spare plates and hobbles.

Nobody said anything else about the shoe. But Jose knew it was one worn that morning by Pete Johnfoot. And Barleycorn knew. The rest guessed. The hands joked with Black Jack, and for the first time made him feel like one of the crew. Even Putt looked at him in sullen awe.

They ate leisurely. Then Tom Dry got out his fiddle and Jose produced his guitar. It was the first relaxation they had had since the night after they crossed the north fork of the Trinity, back in central Texas.

Jose Flores was wise to the cattle trails, to the ways of Texas longhorns and the men who herded them. He was wise to the treachery of men like Putt Horsby, and when Putt did not openly pick another scrap with Black Jack, Jose began to worry. The days had passed, and Putt had been disturbingly docile in the presence of the man who had licked him.

And it did not aid his fears any when, one day after the noon meal, Black Jack saw Horsby let a notch out of his belt and adjust the Mexican peso buckle. The way Black Jack's eyes bulged and his face crimsoned was enough to scare anybody.

"Let me see that belt-buckle!" Black Jack said coldly.

"It's none of yore damn business," Putt mouthed.

Black Jack took a step toward him, then stopped and his eyes lost their wildness. "I'll make it my business—at the end of the trail!"

UP near the northern border of the Territory, the drive was met by a detachment of cavalry. The captain said there was some threat of Indian trouble for the next twenty or thirty miles and offered to escort the herd through the danger zone. Barleycorn accepted gratefully.

Black Jack did not show up for supper that night. Nor for breakfast next morning. Putt Horsby was himself again. He talked loud in front of the soldiers and bragged of his trips up the trail.

At breakfast Henry Turner accidentally tripped over Putt's outstretched feet. "Sorry," he said.

"Sorry, hell! You little whelp. You done it apurpose. I'm a good mind to whale the daylights outer you!"

"What's stopping you?" Henry countered.

The big man put his hands to the ground behind him to get up. Henry clouted him across the temple with his .38 and Putt sank down with a groan.

Jose threw a bucket of water in his

face. Putt came out of it with a bellow. "I'll kill you for that, you two-bit trail-bum!"

Barleycorn drew his gun. "You'll behave yourself or leave the outfit!" he snapped. "And that's final. "The kid beat you to it, and you had it comin'. Now you take it like a man or get out!"

Putt got up, rubbed his head and glowered at Barleycorn. He strode out to his saddle-roll and spread his blanket.

Next day the soldiers rode away. Within an hour Black Jack was in his place back of the point, without anyone noticing where he came from or just when he arrived.

Jose sighed happily as he saw Black Jack ride in with the crew for dinner. He watched him closely, wondering if anyone had told him about the run-in between Henry and Putt the night before. He decided nobody had.

They crossed the border into Kansas late that afternoon and Barleycorn had them slow down the herd. Another three days would take them to Abilene at the rate they were going. The cattle had been pushed hard and some were beginning to show it.

"We'll mosey along along the next two, three days," Barleycorn explained at supper. "Let the critters graze more and rest up. We want the receivers to feel they're gettin' their four-bits worth." The cattle were being delivered on contract—twenty a head on delivery.

Tom Dry hauled out his fiddle again, and Jose his guitar. They sat around the fire a long time. The boys were in a light mood. They were out of the Territory. The Indians would bother them no more. The weather had been good for a week, and the sky was clear. The June weather made sleeping out on scanty rolls comfortable. They had come through without serious loss. All the hands would be in on a sizable bonus at the end of the trail.

After awhile Jose put the big coffee pot on and surprised them with real cream. "Rode out to a squatter's place," Jose explained proudly.

They turned in after awhile, and snores replaced the tingling guitar as Jose readied bacon and beans for breakfast.

Sometime during the night Jose awoke. He sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. Cautiously he limped to the front of the

wagon and peered out. He heard the stir of a horse, then the distant crunch of walking hoofs in the soft loam. He supposed it was midnight and the watches were changing. He rubbed his eyes, peered out again and reluctantly lay back on his bunk. He slept fitfully the rest of the night, with a vague uneasiness he could not understand.

He was up an hour before daybreak. As soon as he started a fire between the rocks he had placed in a square to form an "oven" for his skillet and coffee pot, he moved silently over to where Henry Turner was sleeping. It was too early to wake the crew, but an instinctive urge moved him to look in on the boy.

He peered through the early morning darkness and smiled as he saw Henry's head and shoulders above his blanket. Then he peered again and moved nearer.

What was that black splotch on the blanket, near the top? He stooped over and touched it, then examined his hand. *Blood!*

Wildly he yanked the blanket down. Henry was lying in a pool of blood. He shook him. He didn't respond. Jose felt his pulse.

He sighed with relief as he felt the pounding of blood through his wrist. Jose yelled to arouse the camp and crow-hopped back to the wagon for his lantern.

The men were poking heads above blankets and rubbing their eyes.

"What's the idea wakin' us the middle of th' night?" Cotton Billings grumbled.

"Yeah, what's the idear?" Red River Davids wanted to know.

"It's Henry!" Jose shouted. "He is hurt bad!" He was hobbling back toward Henry with the lantern.

By the time he was back, Black Jack was up. Black Jack felt the boy's pulse, then shoved his arm under him and lifted him. The boy's head lolled back.

"Stabbed in the back!" Black Jack grated.

Jose saw him run his hand under Henry's blanket, where his head had rested. He stopped his empty hand for a second, then hastily felt under the blanket all the way down.

"Got to get him to a doctor!" he snapped. I'll saddle up. Jose, dress the wound as best you can. He's in bad shape. That knife was aimed at his heart!"

Jose started back to his wagon. "I'll hitch up the team," he suggested. "We can put some extra blankets on my bunk—"

"Not time for that!" Black Jack snapped. "I'll take him across my saddle in front of me."

Jose gently wrapped the blanket around the boy and Barleycorn helped him to lift him up to the rider.

For the first time, Jose missed Putt Horsby. A sudden anger enveloped him. He knew now the meaning of the look he had seen on Black Jack's face. Black Jack had noticed his absence too!

Jose methodically fixed breakfast. Nobody ate much. They sat around the fire in silence and blew their coffee between sips. Jose could tell they were thinking the same thing he thought; nobody's words accused Putt Horsby. But their faces did.

"Wonder what Black Jack was looking for under the kid's blanket?" Red River Davids said.

"Bag of dinero," Jose muttered. "Black Jack give it to him the day the soldiers came. Told him to keep it for him. Henry said I should not tell; but now there is no difference."

THE crew was three men short now—Black Jack, Henry Turner and Putt Horsby. The country was level as a floor, and little vegetation, except the belly-high grass, marred the trail. The cattle were trail-broken, and the short crew had no trouble. They pushed the critters leisurely.

Two nights later they bedded down the herd a day's drive from Abilene. Through the clear night Jose could see the faint glow of Abilene's lights, but his heart was heavy. The end of the trail meant nothing to him without young Henry Turner.

Billings and Red River Davids were out riding herd; the others sat glumly around the fire. The muffled thud of hoofs on the sod alerted them. Jose saw the men instinctively move hands to gun-butts.

Black Jack rode into the circle of flickering light. He dropped his reins and dismounted. He moved near the fire and shoved his black Stetson back on his head.

"The boy'll be all right," he announced.

Jose felt like dancing around his peg leg. "Think God!" he whispered.

"Tough younker, that," Black Jack went on. "The blade came within half an inch of his heart. Bled like an ox. But the sawbones said he'd pull through.

"I left him at the doctor's house. It's a white cottage with a red roof. Edge of town on your right as you go in. You can't miss it," he went on. "Boss, hold my pay. I'll see you around sometime."

He climbed his horse and galloped away.

Barleycorn Light wound up the business of delivery and took care of all other details, including paying off the hands. Then he went on a toot. Barleycorn't toots were something that the boys wrote home about. He was a good, conscientious trail boss. When he worked, nothing else was allowed to distract from the job at hand. When he celebrated, he celebrated just as conscientiously.

Jose went about keeping an eye on Henry Turner at the doctor's house, and John Barleycorn Light staggered from one saloon to another. Barleycorn was every inch a man and he carried his whiskey as well as he bossed a cattle outfit. But there always was a chance that he would brush with some trail-bum and get into trouble. Shoot or get shot. Jose was slightly given to worry, anyway, and now he had a full day and night of it, between Barleycorn and Henry.

Barleycorn started looking for Black Jack. "Now there's a man for you," he muttered to old Jose. "We didn't show proper 'preciation when he was with us. I wanna find him. Buy 'im a drink. A good hand, that Black Jack. Oh, shore;

he's on the dodge. So's half of Abilene. So'm I—in some quarters! It's funny thing, Jose. Think I seen that rannihan somewhere a long time ago. Looks mighty familiar! We gotta find Black Jack!"

Jose followed him from saloon to saloon, catering to his whims like a tired range cow with twin calves. Finally Barleycorn consented to go to bed. "But just to please you, Jose!" he emphasized.

Black Jack caught up with Putt Horsby the following morning just about daybreak. A lazy wisp of smoke in a cottonwood-lined draw was like a beacon guiding Black Jack to his quarry.

He was within ten feet of the fugitive before the man noticed. Putt wheeled around, his gun in hand.

Before Putt Horsby's gun was level, a slug from Black Jack's single-action .45 ploughed into the walnut handle of Putt's Colt. It splintered the handle and creased Putt's hand, all the way from the knuckle of his fore-finger back to the base of his thumb. The gun thudded to the ground.

"Don't try to reach for it!" Black Jack said in a voice that sounded like the cracking of ice. "Don't make me shoot you!"

He advanced stealthily, walking low, his knees slightly bowed. "Move back!" he ordered.

"You wouldn't murder an unarmed man!"

"No, Horsby. But I should! You stabbed that kid in cold-blood. I'll take care of you for that. But first I want to see that peso belt-buckle!"

He snatched Horsby's jacket back. "I thought so," he said in a half-whisper.

"It was him or me!" Horsby begged.

"Same as with the kid," Black Jack reminded. Now he kept one eye on the fugitive and with the other he scooped up the man's shattered gun. He transferred it and his own gun to one hand and then deliberately tossed them in the brush.

He saw the sudden cunning in Horsby's eyes, the sudden revival of hope. "Don't get yore dander up, Horsby! Just shootin' you would be too merciful. No, you're not getting out that simple, hombre. You're paying the hard way!"

Black Jack struck out with his right fist, and all his pent-up fury was in the swing. It missed Horsby's chin by a fraction, but its impact against his jaw was

terrific. The big man wobbled backward.

Black Jack was wild now. There was no mercy in him. No sense of fairness, no feeling of compassion. The impulse to kill overpowered him, and his cold frenzy gave him more strength.

Black Jack flung a left to the man's stomach and it doubled him. A right caught him on the tip of the chin and he thudded to the ground.

Black Jack grasped Horsby by the collar and dragged him upright. "Get up, you yellow-livered coyote! You're not quitting yet. Stand up and fight. Fight, you blasted dry-gulcher!"

He dashed the pan of water Horsby had brought for coffee on the man's face and it brought him around. Black Jack helped him to his feet and waited for him to regain his breath. "I'm going to beat the life out of you with my hands. You're going to die like a snake, inch by inch. You'll feel some of the hell you brought to others!"

Horsby shook his head. His knees wobbled and he staggered backward. Black Jack did not notice that he was staggering toward the brush where the two guns lay, until almost too late.

The toe of his boot caught the man squarely in the seat as he stooped and grabbed for a gun. The kick sent him skidding along the gravel and brush, several feet beyond reach of the guns.

He sprang at Putt and seized him by the throat, dragged him away from the guns and into the open. He showered his face with fists.

Horsby doubled up and shielded his face

with his hands. Black Jack clipped him in the stomach.

He swung a right to the chin, and Horsby's face snapped up as though his neck had turned to rubber. Many blows fell upon the man's bleeding face, and as he started to slump, Black Jack showered him with blows.

After awhile he walked over to Horsby and turned him on his back with his boot-toe. No movement showed in the silent chest of the body, and no breath passed the horribly mangled lips. He reached down and his hands moved reverently as he removed the peso buckle from the dead man's belt.

Black Jack retrieved his gun, mounted, and rode to the nearest camp-site on the Texas trail.

NOW, three days out on the back-trail, Barleycorn, Henry Turner—who had recovered sufficiently to ride in the chuck-wagon with Jose—Tom Dry and Jose sat around the campfire.

Jose was strumming his guitar and Henry sat propped up against a saddle and a roll of blankets, his small face still white and drawn.

The muffled sound of slow-moving hoofs came to them and Barleycorn signaled Jose to stop playing. The men sat or stood expectantly. In a moment a black gelding walked into the circle of light.

"'Low, folks," the rider said, dismounting. "Any gravy and Arbuckle left for a deserter?"

"Black Jack! You 'onnery old maverick!" Barleycorn exploded. He pumped the grinning man's hand. "Looked all over Abilene for you. Wanted to buy you a slug of panther pizon."

Black Jack wore a sheepish expression. "Well, there's something about crowds I don't like. Especially if they included star-toters."

He tapped Henry lightly on the shoulder. "Hello, kid. How goes it?" he grinned down. "You couldn't kill that rascal with a charge of dynamite," he said boastfully to the others, obviously for Henry's benefit.

"A chip from the old stump!" Jose bragged.

Black Jack was shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The black stubble on his face was even longer now; and its blackness, it seemed to Jose, almost sparkled as the light from the campfire touched it. Finally he removed a small bag from under his wide black belt. He dropped it into Henry's hands. "Here's the money the varmint stole from you when he stabbed you in the back. You earned it, just for holding it for me. Only it's for your Ma. Been kind of saving it up for her. Never mind why."

Then Black Jack slowly removed a belt-buckle from the pocket of his leather jacket. He handed it to Henry with a gentleness foreign to his way. "And this, Henry, is for you. Take it and wear it. And when you wear it, hold your head high. It once belonged to a mighty fine man. We used to kind of range together, a long time ago. John Henry Turner, your Pa!"

"Why you 'onnery rascal!" Barleycorn roared. "I knew you had a familiar look all along. Why, the last time I saw you down in Bexar County, you wasn't as big as Henry here. You old hossfly! Why didn't you tell me at the start!"

"Didn't want to embarrass you for one thing. For another, knowing all the tales they tell on me back in Texas, thought maybe you wouldn't let me hook up with you. I knew Henry was on his first drive and I had to go along and sort of keep an eye on the colt."

Black Jack cleared his throat and Jose saw a faint embarrassment in his eyes. "You see, Henry, your Pa was my brother. I'm your uncle, Jack Turner."

He mounted hurriedly and touched spurs to the gelding. The rising line of dust marked his route toward the haunts of the men who ride farthest under cover of darkness.

"My uncle Jack!" Henry said with reverence. "My uncle!"

Jose saw Barleycorn watching the pride in the boy's face and he saw the sudden wildness go out of old Barleycorn's eyes. "But he's an Owl-hooter, remember," Barleycorn said slowly. "He's followed the backtrails and he can never turn. Respect him, yes; but remember, the Owl-hoot trail leads only to the grave."

Henry swallowed the lump in his throat. "I will, Boss. I will," he sighed.

BARB-WIRE and BULLETS

by Delbert McGuire

THE BARBED-WIRE FENCE, LIKE THE SIX-SHOOTERS, WAS BROUGHT IN FROM THE NORTH.... AND IT SPELLED THE DOOM OF THE BIG SOUTH-WESTERN CATTLE BARONS.

THE SIX-SHOOTER enabled the cattleman to gain a foothold in Texas against the nomadic Indian and the Vaquero from across the border, but the barbed-wire fence spelled his doom, and drove the cattle kings out of business less than 50 years after they rose to boss the Southwestern range.

Close on the heels of the first wire fences came the fence-cutters, and their deeds are legend in the prairie countries today. Many of the incidents are humorous, as is the one about the large syndicate ranch that had only hired men on the spread. It had been fenced, and wire cutters were slashing the lines nightly. The riders could not cope with the situation.

So the county sheriff rounded up a group of clerks from the town's stores, and organized a patrol to protect the syndicate's fences.

The store workers had their girl friends and wives pack a lunch for them, took liquid refreshment, and set out at sundown on their task, promising to bring in some fence cutters as prisoners come the morning.

As they rode up out of a gully on their way to the ranch, they were met by a group of masked riders armed with shotguns. The masked men disarmed the "counter-jumpers", took their refreshments, and led them on to the fence. Each guard took four or five dudes, and emphasizing his words with his shotgun, said,

"Now start cutting."

All night the posse cut fence, and by morning had made about ten miles, cutting only on one side of the posts,

At daybreak the masked riders gave their helpers a drink of their own whiskey, and then the leader told them, "Boys, we shore appreciate your help. Now start back to town, and don't be too quick to look back."

A nester in Texas in the late 1880's decided to fence himself off a field, to protect it from range cattle. He acquired some cedar posts and barbed wire and began the tiresome task.

One hot, stifling day as he worked in a coulee on one side of a hill, fence cutters were busy on the other side of that hill, cutting his wire in strips about a yard long. This incident was typical of Texas at that time, and the practice became so common that many who had fenced their fields later went back, took their fences down, and rolled up the wire to save the expensive materials.

The barbed-wire fence, like the six-shooter, was brought in from the North. Although four men developed it and applied for patents, J. F. Glidden of De Kalb, Illinois, is conceded to be its inventor by most historians.

Glidden sought a cheaper substitute for the rail and hedge fence. He succeeded, but started a scrap down in Texas that raged across the state for years, killed many men, and ruined many good saddle horses. For when they first encountered barbed-wire fences, range stock had no fear of it. Many cut their tendons and legs so badly as to cripple them for life.

The manufacture of barbed wire, or "bob wire" as it is known to the fellows who string it, had a very crude beginning. The barbs were made at night, in the kitchen of Glidden's farm house, by twisting them around the shaft of a coffee mill, using stationary pegs to hold one end.

Then a lad would climb the windmill tower with a length of galvanized wire and

a bucket of barbs, and string them on. When enough had been slipped over for that length, they were spaced evenly and secured by hitting each with a hammer.

The single barbed wire was then fastened to a grindstone, another slick wire was tied to the other side, and the opposite ends were secured. The whirling grindstone twisted the wires, which were usually made in 40 foot lengths.

Senator Washburn of Illinois, who owned a wire factory, became interested in the project and bought a half interest from Glidden for $60,000. He then visited an industrial firm and asked an engineer to devise a mechanical device to process the wire. The result was barbed wire manufactured entirely by machine, from cutting the barbs to twisting and rolling the product onto spools.

ONE cowboy who visited the factory where the wire was turned out by the carloads went home and told his friends, "You might as well quit cutting barbed wire, and quit splitting rails to replace it. Barbed wire is coming shore, and nothing we can do will stop it."

It did come. Many miles of wire fencing was built in the Southwest in a short time after the introduction of barbed wire at no expense to the builder: he simply took down his split-rail or wooden fence and sold the lumber for more than enough to buy the new materials.

A "fence wagon" would drive along a line of posts, stringing wire behind it off the spools. After a half mile or so, a rear wheel was jacked up, the wire fastened to the hub, and stretched with the wheel's leverage. Men could build many more miles of wire fence in a day than rails could be erected.

Handling barbed wire, according to the cowboys who were unlucky enough to draw this assignment in slack seasons, was a barbarous way of making "forty a month and found." When the first carload arrived in Mexia, Texas, in the early 80's, no one could be persuaded even to unload it.

Finally a crew of idle cowboys built a chute to the ground, and a group inside the car began sliding the rolls down to the loaders outside. One roll jumped the chute, however, and tore the trouser leg off a cowhand below. All the hands quit and retired to the local brass rail, and didn't return until they had been properly immunized against infection.

Barbed wire figured into the lives of everyone who settled in the unbroken West. The writer has an unpleasant recollection of sitting in a gully, out of sight of the house, very sick to the stomach from smoking the bark stripped off the cedar posts. Some of the "hardier" boys ("hardier" to convince, that is) learned to smoke that way.

But barbed-wire fences did not gain instant success with the larger spreads in Texas. Few ranchers believed that they would hold stock. H. B. Sandborn, who was general agent for the Glidden Wire interest in the Southwest, thought of an original idea to prove its worth to them. He fenced a small square in a plaza in downtown San Antonio, then brought in a herd of the wildest longhorns he could secure. Cattle from the brush country who usually raised tail and skimmed the countryside at the approach of a single rider were penned in the plaza.

Ranchers wandered by daily, waiting for the cattle to tear down the fence, jump it, or to cut themselves to ribbons fighting it. But the wily longhorns learned rapidly, and outside of a few scratches, they stayed whole and inside the fence. Barbed wire began to appear on ranches around San Antonio directly afterward.

As soon as it became apparent that wire fences would hold cattle, and had come to Texas to stay, the race began among the ranchers, nesters, and cowhands who had a yen to work for themselves, to fence in all the available land, especially that bordering water.

A quarter section could be homesteaded by any settler who wanted to live on it and improve it. So many big spreads had each of their cowboys homestead his quarter along the creek or water supply, and the whole strip was then fenced off. The ranch that controlled the water supply controlled also the land back to the top of the divide, for the grass was worthless without water. Later the ranchers bought out the quarter-section homesteads.

The nester profited most from the introduction of barbed-wire fences. He started by erecting them as barricades against the cattle who ate his crops. Then as more

settlers poured onto the range, the "wide loop" came into use to start many a drifter toward a small herd and respectability. The small farmer saw his water holes being used by increasing numbers of herds, and his choice valleys fenced off for alfalfa and fodder to feed them. He started to enclose his land, then, to prevent someone taking it away from him.

When the windmill came into extensive use in the Southwest, the range was cross-fenced, and water was placed so cattle would not have to walk over four miles to drink, bettering the rancher's lot greatly. He could breed up his herds, by fencing them off from scrub bulls; he could rotate grazing to improve the grass; and he could save flesh on his cows by cutting down the distance each walked for water.

BUT the windmill helped the nester even more. He could then set up in the middle of the big pastures—supposedly open range, where the water had been closed off by the ranchers. He fenced off his fields, and dug a well by the house for water. A garden helped him over the rough years, and Texas law forced the rancher to place gates in the fence lines every three miles. Thus he could raise his crops without the use of a creek, and he could get out to sell his produce.

Many nesters found the going rough, however. The droughts fell across his door many times oftener than the rains came. A newcomer to the Plains looked around a bit, and said, "This would be a fine country if we just had water."

"Yes," answered a man whose wagon tongue pointed east, "so would hell."

Most everyone in the Southwest has heard about the nester who went back east to visit his sick mother. As he walked down the streets of Chicago, which had grown a lot since his departure several years before, he stretched his neck looking up at the tall buildings. While staring skyward, a drop of rain hit him in the face. He fainted dead away, and onlookers had to pour three buckets of sand in his face to bring him around.

In his book, *The Great Plains,* Dr. Walter Prescott Webb, professor of history at

The University of Texas, says: "It was possible to tell which way the emigrant was going by the remains around his camp fire. If he was going west, the camp was littered with tin cans and paper sacks; if he was going east, it was surrounded by field-lark feathers and rabbit fur."

For every nester that turned back, however, many came to take his place. Finally, most of the large spreads were cut up and sold as farms. The herds were shipped by train to grain feed-lots, replacing the cattle drives up the Old Chisholm Trail. One by one, the cattle empires of the Southwest faded into the past to take their place with the buffalo, the Indian raider, and the cheery welcome at the "big house" for any traveller.

A few are left; the King Ranch, on the Texas Coast, and the JA Ranch in Central Texas.

And, of course, several of the dude variety. When J. F. Glidden made his first strand of barbed wire in De Kalb, Illinois, he sounded the death knell of a way of life in the Southwest—although that way was but in its infancy.

The men who had made this way possible—the soft-spoken, hard-riding cowboys, broke up and drifted away. Although the barbed wire could hold Texas' toughest maverick, it could not hold the westerner who wanted above all else to be free. Many of the old timers died along with the cattle kingdom, and although they would be the last to admit it, probably they died mainly of a broken heart.

THE HANGROPE KID

By RICHARD BRISTER

Boots were shakin' in Andrus-town tonight. Murder suspects were a dime-a-dozen—and the outraged orphan kid could point the finger of guilt at the hombre who'd done him most dirt.

THE DAY began like any other day in the sleepy little trail town of Andrus, Wyoming. About five o'clock, a rooster crowed lustily in the littered backyard of Ma Spinger's boardinghouse, signal for the town dogs to rise, stretch and start their daily plundering expedition among the garbage pails riming Anderson's Alley.

Ma Spinger, a large, full-bosomed woman with muscles like stone, was the town's earliest riser, having so many mouths to feed at her boarding house. Doc Peasley, combination druggist, town doctor and undertaker, was usually up and stirring about his store with the first warming rays of the sun, and by seven-thirty, generally, all the worthwhile citizens of Andrus the drones and human dray hosses, old Drunken Mike Bedloe liked to call them— were making foot traffic along the rickety plank walks that bordered Andrus Street.

Everything was as usual. A routine day. And yet, as the withered old druggist-doctor-undertaker stood there enjoying another sunrise, a sharp sense of forboding laid its clammy hand on him. He turned, shivering, though the morning was unduly warm, and hobbled back into his store.

Billy Applegate, at precisely that moment, was pushing a large, stale-smelling mop across the rough pine board floor of the Straight Shot Saloon. He had already swept a litter of stale cheroots, cigarettes and cigars into his dustpan and dumped the nose-crinkling offal of last night's gaiety into the big iron barrel out back.

Joe Carnavail, the Straight Shot's number-two bartender, rested his meaty elbows on the oak surface, his blocky chin in his pale hands, and watched Billy's dextrous passes at the floor with the ragged mop.

"You better hop to it, kid," he suggested. "We're s'posed to open this rattrap at nine, an' Jake'll raise—"

"The devil with Jake!" said Billy, and stopped mopping to lean on the mop handle and smile blandly at the stout, white-skinned bartender. "Jake don't scare me," announced Billy, who was chewing tobacco like a hard-bitten old timer, though he was yet to see his thirteenth birthday.

"You're a fresh kid," Joe Carnavail told him.

Billy digested that information, not without pleasure. He was a skinny runt of a boy, with a freckled, unlovely face topped by stubborn locks of wire-red hair. He wore a permanently truculent expression, as if to make up in aggressiveness what he lacked in size and years.

"So I'm a fresh kid," he said shortly, and went on with his mopping.

"Someday," said Carnavail, who cringed before the biting tongue and flashing fists of Jake Purkey, their mutual boss, as Billy Applegate never had cringed, "you're gonna backsass Jake once too often an' get your come-uppance."

Billy spat a brown stream at one of the large cuspidors which he had just finished cleaning. Carnavail was a human jackal, Billy reasoned, the type of man who was destined to be pushed around as long as he lived. Billy had been pushed around plenty, in his twelve short years, but at least, he could pride himself on the fact that he never had taken it lying down.

BILLY APPLEGATE was an orphan, had been for three years now. His mother and father had been killed in a train wreck, and they'd left neither money nor friends to care for Billy. The kid had been abruptly thrown upon the charity of

this town. But even back then, there had been a strange, proud streak in Billy. He had been a rather insufferable youngster. He had antagonized every helping hand that was extended toward him.

"I don't want nobody givin' me nothin'," he'd blurted savagely at old Doc Peasely, when that kind soul offered to take Billy into his own home. "I wanta grow up to be a free man," Billy said stoutly, "not beholden to people."

A precocious youngster, the town had said of him, when he had visited the town's business people, asking for odd jobs. He had lined up odd jobs aplenty, enough to keep his small belly from hunger pangs most of the time, enough to support his truculent attitude toward the townspeople who had never known what it was like to be orphaned, and hence never took the trouble to try to understand Billy.

Billy was a little hardcase, not above rolling a drunk for a dollar or two when he simply had to have money, not above other forms of petty larceny which would help him keep his frail little body and soul together. But he could honestly say to himself that he had never indulged in

crime for the sake of crime itself. Always, his small hand had been forced to it by harsh necessity, and even at times like that he never took more from his unsuspecting fellow citizens in Andrus than he needed to satisfy his immediate wants.

Billy was a practical youth. Experience was the controlling factor in his young life, though he would have spat in disgust if any man tried such a long-handled work out on him.

"Trouble with you, Joe," he told the fat barman, "is you let Jake get the Indian sign on you. You're like a hoss that's been broke to a curb bit. Jake's knocked all the dander out of you. He don't have to do nothin' but look at you an' you start cringin' like a hound dawg expectin' a whuppin'."

Carnavail's eyes darkened. "Why, you fresh little punk, I got a good mind t'—"

Billy stuck his tongue out at Joe, and said happily, "Look who's tryin' t' throw a temper. Gutless Joe Carnavail, the good-natured bartender who never gets sore at the cowboys for fear they'll bust his bald head in. Beetle your eyebrows all you want to, Joe. You don't faze me none. I got your number. Got you down cold."

"Kid," Joe said heavily, "I always knowed that sassy tongue of yours'd git you neck-deep in trouble sometime. You bought this, sonny."

He came marching across the floor and lunged at the youngster. Billy chuckled, and scampered lightly aside. As Joe lumbered off balance, Billy neatly inserted the mop between the barman's legs. Joe Carnavail fell facedown to the floor. He caught himself on his hands and lurched erect again, raging.

"You little smart aleck, I'll—"

Billy pocked him in the belly with the mop handle. This was real sport, he thought agreeably. Like going after pigs with a stick. He heard Joe grunt, like those selfsame porkers of Billy's imagination. Then Joe had grabbed the end of the mop and yanked it away from him. He swung the mop at Billy in a roundhouse motion. Billy ducked and the mop swished over his neck.

Joe came lumbering at him. Billy butted him full in the soft stomach. Carnavail ran in back of the bar and grabbed a Colt .45 and aimed it at Billy. His face was livid with fury. "Git out," he panted. "Git outta sight, you fresh little squirt, or by Gawd, I'll blow a hole in yer britches that'll take silver dollars."

BILLY turned toward the door, shrugging as Joe Carnavail called after him. "Show your carrot head in here again, kid, and I'll plunk a bullet through one of them stick legs. I had all the backsass I intend to take from you."

Billy moved up the plank walk past Doc Peasley's drugstore. A brown cur dog, rummaging after stray scraps of food in the gutter, came at Billy's call, and stood happily as Billy rubbed the thick fur under the dog's chin.

"You an' me," said Billy philosophically, "stand about even-Stephen in Andrus, old timer. Pick up what scraps we can, and take a licking from whoever wants to take a crack at us. Provided, of course, we're willin' to take it, which, personally, I ain't."

The dog wagged its tail, and showed its yellow teeth in what appeared to be a smile. Billy chuckled wryly. "I jest had an eye-opener, old timer. Times comes when folks ain't willin' t' fight fair with a fella. Got to pull hawglegs out from behind the counter and git old Judge Colt over on their side agin ya. Ain't a man livin' that can stand again old Judge Colt. I reckon mebbe it's high time Billy Applegate made Judge's Colt's acquaintance his ownself. An' bein' I'm flat broke, as usual, I got to go stealin' again. That's the worst of it."

He walked down the high plank sidewalk to Uncle Joe Bannerman's Hardware.

Uncle Joe had scores of revolvers in stock, and plenty of cartridges. Billy moved around to the back of the big frame building, and peeked in a window. Uncle Joe was sitting on a high stool in back of the counter, near the front door, reading as usual. The old man was squinting hard at the fine print of his volume, being very near-sighted. Also, Billy knew, Uncle Joe was hard of hearing, and absent-minded. It should be no great stunt, Billy thought, for a slick-fingered twelve-year-old like himself to creep in the back way and corral a revolver and a beltful of

ca'tridges without being detected.

Billy glanced quickly up and down Andrus Street, then sneaked in the back door of Uncle Joe's shop. He heard a board creak, once, as his one-hundred pounds came down full weight upon it, and he stood like a stone, watching Uncle Joe's face.

The grizzled hardwareman didn't move an eyelid. Billy stole cautiously around in back of the counter and was just reaching for a likely looking .45 Colt, when luck turned against him. There was a clump of bootheels on the walk outside, and a man came into the store.

It was Drunken Mike Bedloe, the black sheep of Andrus. The old man—actually, Drunken Mike was no more than forty, though the savage inroads of rotgut whisky made him look closer to sixty—stepped up to the counter and snapped his red fingers in front of Uncle Joe's face.

The grizzled hardwareman closed his book with a slap, and squinted at Drunken Mike, then made a hard face. "Howdy, Mike," he said. "What'll it be?"

Billy ducked down in back of the counter on the other side of the shop, but from where he crouched he still was able to watch the play of emotion across both men's faces. And he had not been a swamper in Jake Purkey's Straight Shot for nothing. Drunken Mike was in a bad state of the weemies, Billy could tell.

"Ain't here t' buy," he said thickly. "Fact is, I—"

"If you ain't here to buy," he said curtly, "you can keep movin', Mike. I ain't got time to pass time-o'-day with the likes of you. I'm busy."

"No need to edge yourself off on me," snarled Mike. "I ain't done nothin'."

"That's right. You ain't, Mike. You ain't never done nothin'. Leastways not nothin' a body can point to as constructive. Now jist trot your hocks on outta my place, an'—"

"Not so fast," said Mike Bedloe, and his voice had a brittle sound to it. "I come in here to borry a dollar off'n you, Joe. I reckoned y'd probably turn me down, bein' the old miser you are. That'd be fine; I ain't sayin' you owe me nothin', but you coulda kep' a civil tongue in yer head to my way o' thinkin'."

"Who you callin' miser?"

"You," snarled the town wastrel. "I'd've gone on out of here peaceful enough, was you descent, Joe. Now . .. I ain't movin' a step till you hand me the dollar I come for. You want to insult Mike Bedloe, it costs you a dollar. That's my stand, and I'm holdin' fast to it."

"Get out of here,' said Uncle Joe. "Get out, before I go for the sheriff. This is no more nor less than a holdup. You'll force no dollar from me to throw over the bar in Purkey's pigsty. Git, now."

"You gunna hand me that dollar I'm askin'," said Mike, "or must I choke it out of you?" He was desperate now. The scene, Billy saw grimly, had worn Drunken Mike's nerves to a frazzle. He had to have a pick-me-up now, or he would go completely to pieces,. He would choke the old man, as he had threatened. Apparently the hardwareman realized that, also. He reached under the counter.

DRUNKEN MIKE moved quicker. He grabbed a heavy wood plane from atop the counter and brought it down with a solid thuck on the hardwareman's head. Uncle Joe reached out and tried to punch Mike. Mike lifted the bludgeon again and brought it down harder on the older man's head this time. Uncle Joe slumped back of the counter.

Mike punched the no-sale key of the cash register, and hastily emptied change and greenbacks into his pockets. Then he skulked out of the shop through the back door.

Billy was afraid to move.

It could not have been more than two or three minutes before the second man came into Uncles Joe's shop, but to the stricken Billy it seemed like hours. He was startled half out of his wits when he saw that the newcomer was none other than Joe Carnavail.

"Hi," Joe yelled. "Hi, Uncle Joe. Where ya hidin'? Jake's needin' some things for the saloon. Hi, there, wh—" The voice choked off, then, and from where he crouched, Billy could see the brutal shock writing its message across Joe Carnavail's pudgy face, as the bartender peered over the counter and saw the limp form of the hardwareman.

Billy heard Joe Carnavail's low whistle,

and watched the stout man leap around the counter to inspect the victim. He was out of sight for some time, and when he finally arose, there was a new presence within the store. It was Doc Peasly, the bandy-legged druggist. Doc said in his thin, raspy voice, "Where's Uncle Joe? Lord, man, what's that stuff on your hands there? Looks like—like blood."

Joe Carnavail seemed to wilt. "It is blood," he whimpered. "It—it's Uncle Joe's blood. Look, Doc," he said, and his blue eyes sent a plea for help, "I didn't do this. I swear to—"

Doc Peasley waved Joe to silence, and peered over the counter. "Dead, is he?"

"Y-yes," sputtered Joe.

Doc swung quickly on him. "How did you know?"

"W-Why, I looked at 'im, Doc. I—I—" Joe was fast going to pieces. His dazed mind was beginning to piece this thing together in its proper perspective. "Listen, Doc, I know it don't look good but I swear I never done Uncle Joe in. I—"

"You and I," said Doc Peasley firmly, "had better go down and have a confab with the sheriff. Come on." He grabbed Joe Carnavail's elbow. The barman cringed away from him. "What's the matter?" asked Doc. "If you didn't do it, as you say, what do you have to be afraid of?"

"N-Nothin', Doc."

"Come on, then."

It was on the point of Billy Applegate's lips to protest but his hardened young soul loosed a chuckle from his undernourished body. The fates certainly had delivered Joe Carnavail right into his hands.

And besides, he thought suddenly, if he did talk, people would be certain to question him about his presence in the store to begin with. Drunken Mike was a sot, but he was nobody's fool. He'd turn on Billy like a shot, if Billy tried to tell the truth about what had happened, and he'd swear Billy had done the killing himself, and was lying to save his own skin. It would be Billy's word against Drunken Mike's, and Billy had never been such a good one for talking. Who'd take the word of the town's no-account orphan kid, when he could point to no legitimate business in the hardware store to begin with?

Let Joe Carnavail sweat, Billy thought grimly. It's no affair of mine. Far as I'm concerned, I was never in the store this morning, and that's all there is to it.

He crept carefully out of the store, using the same back door through which he had entered.

He walked blithely into the encircling vise of two talon-like arms. The man grasped Billy in a crushing bearhug. Scared half out of his wits, Billy quit struggling, and stared up at the pock-marked, bloated face.

"What's the big idea?" growled Billy.

"Mebbe," said Drunken Mike, "I ought-ta be askin' you that there question, sonny. What was you doin' in Uncle Joe's place? How come you to be sneakin' out the back door, thisaway?"

"That's my business."

Mike twisted the kid's arm till the joints screamed a protest. Sweat popped on the youngster's freckled forehead. "You keep a civil tongue in yer head when you talk t' me, kid, or I'll bust yer arm off ya clean as a whistle. How long was you inside there?"

Billy thought fast.

"I wasn't in there more'n two-three minutes," said Billy, gulping.

Mike pushed the kid's arm back farther. "Yer lyin', kid. I bin standin' outside here that long myself."

"I don't know how to count time up fer certain," said Billy. "Mebbee I was in there a mite longer."

"What was you doin' inside there?"

Billy decided on the truth, figuring it was more believable than any lie he could make up. And besides, if Drunken Mike thought they were partners in crime, sort of, he might not act so distrustful of Billy. "I was out to swipe myself a gun-belt an' ca-tridges an' a sixgun."

Mike's beady eyes clamped hard on Billy's and then the town wastrel said, "Kid, if you're lyin' t' me, I'll gut-shoot you so quick—"

"I ain't lyin', Mike. Honest."

"Then how come you to walk out of there empty -handed?"

"Joe Carnavail come bustin' in right when I was all set to grab the gun and belt of bullets I was after. Then Doc Peasely come in, and they found Uncle Joe Bannerman lyin' down back of his counter with his head stove in. Joe had blood on

his hand from inspectnig Uncle Joe's body, I reckon. Doc Peasley run him off down to the sheriff's office."

Mike gasped. "Then—it looks like Carnavail killed Uncle Joe, hey? Why, daggone my britches, that there's a murder, kid. They'll hang Carnavail for a thing like that. They'll have him strung up afore sundown."

"I reckon," said Billy.

Mike stared at Billy for a long moment. It was a strange sort of sparring match, Billy reflected. Drunken Mike was still in doubt as to how much Billy knew. He was unwilling to admit that his hand had really struck Uncle Joe down. And until he laid his cards on the table, Mike's hands were tied. He could not threaten Billy to keep the kid's lips buttoned if it came to a showdown.

But he could try, in his clumsy way. "Kid," he said, "we seen a good bit of each other, off an' on, in the Straight Shot. You always seemed like a sensible younker to me. Seems like you never took no shine to Joe Carnavail, neither. Don't do nothin' that'll git me mad at you, kid. That's all."

"Why would I?" said Billy. "I got nothin' agin you, Mike."

"Just you take care, kid. Just don't you mess in where you ain't needed, that's all. They ain't a thing to stop me from gut-shootin' a little monkey like you, if you was t' give me any reason." He flung Billy away like a rag doll. "All right, git movin'. An' mind what I been sayin'."

Billy went to the back door of Ma Spinger's boardinghouse and knocked timidly. The huge, slab-muscled woman, with the puffy red face opened the door and stared out quizzically at him. "Well?" she said. "Well, Billy?"

"Beggin' yer pardon, Ma, I lost my job at the Straight Shot this mornin'. Joe Carnavail throwed me out before I had breakfast, an—"

Ma Spinger waved a muscular arm at a pile of wod near the well. "Start chopping, Billy. I've never turned a hungry mouth away from my door long as folks are willing to work for what they consume."

Billy made the axe fly, but it took him an hour to reduce the pile of wood to cook-stove proportions. During that hour, Ma went uptown to shop. She was brimful with the tragic news when she finally set a bowl of porridge in front of Billy.

"Uncle Joe Bannerman's been killed," she said bluntly. "Poor old fellow. And it looks like Joe Carnavail's the guilty party. Doc Peasley happened into Uncle Joe's place right after the deed was done and practically caught Carnavail in the bloody act. Ain't it a tarnation shame the way grown men'll let their natures get the best of them?"

"Sure is, Ma," said Billy, filling his belly.

"You seem to take it calm."

"I never liked Carnavail," Billy said slowly. "And I didn't know Uncle Joe very well. So it doesn't hit me so hard as it hits some others, Ma. What'll happen now, I wonder?"

Ma Spinger tossed her large shoulders. "What always happens in an unruly town like Andrus when there's been a cold-blooded killing? They're holding court down in the sheriff's place now. Sheriff's trying to keep it a legal trial, but the men are edgy. Friends of Uncle Joe's are all for stringing Carnavail up before sundown. Don't suppose the sheriff's going to be able to stop them."

Billy finished his porridge and stood up. "Guess I'll mosey down and see the excitement."

THREE minutes later, he was walking into the sheriff's office. A crowd of angry townsmen were grouped around Joe Carnavail. The bartender was almost unrecognizable. He looked sick. Billy felt a finger of guilt prod his conscience.

"I never done it, I tell you," Carnavail quavered, glancing hopefully from one face to another. "I never bashed Uncle Joe's head in. What for would I do that? I never had nothing agin him."

Doc Peasley said wearily, "You'll have to do better than that, Joe. The old man hadn't been dead more'n two-three minutes when I walked in on you. And you with his blood on your hands. That wood plane you hit him with sittin' right there on the counter, big as life."

"I never done it!" cried Carnavail, sweating. "Sure, I had blood on my hands. Like I told you, I'd just stood up from lookin' him over. That's how come I bloodied my hands, and—"

"If I know you, Joe," put in the tall, bony-faced sheriff, "you ain't the type to be interested in examinin' corpses. Seems t' me you always shied away from blood when there come a fracas up at the Straight Shot. But you got a right hot temper, I've noticed. You'd be jest the type to pick up the nearest thing handy and clap the old man on the head if he said somethin' that displeased you."

"That ain't evidence," protested Joe. "That's just one man's opinion. You can't convict a man on that stuff, Sheriff."

"I'm not trying to convict you," said the sheriff, red-faced, suddenly remembering his lawman's duty. "Matter of fact, boys," he said to the others, "I don't hold with this kind of trial. I'm gonna slap Joe here in jail and hold him for a regular trial. Meanwhile, they's just a chance we'll turn up some new evidence that'll put a new complexion on things. So, let's clear the office now."

The objection to that came, not too surprisingly, thought Billy, from Drunken Mike Bedloe. "Seem t' me it's a pretty clear case, Sheriff. Don't see no need to spend good money on feedin' an' sleepin' the man on taxpayers' money when quick justice'd be a heap cheaper."

"Nobody asked you what you thought, Mike," growled the harried lawman. "No need for you to worry about the taxpayers' money, either, seein' as how you ain't paid taxes in years now."

Still, the seed had been planted. Doc Peasely, who had been a great friend of Uncle Joe Bannerman's, said pointedly, "Mike's right for once. What about the rest of you boys?"

The men started a crafty advance on the sheriff, who pulled his gun out and said bitterly, "I ain't aimin' to kill nobody unless I have to. But I'll sure as sin pump lead through the legs of the first man lays a hand on me."

Mike Bedloe had crept around in back of the lawman. He suddenly grabbed the sheriff's arm from behind, yanked down viciously on it, and sent the sheriff's gun spinning to the floor. The townsmen overpowered the surly lawman and locked him up in one of his own jail cells.

Somebody produced a length of hemp and they swiftly tied Joe Carnavail's hands behind him. They marched the hapless bartender down Andrus Street toward the big oak tree on the edge of town. Billy Applegate followed, a feeling slightly sick to his stomach. He had never seen a more pitiful sight than Joe Carnavail made, watching the grim-faced supporters of justice fling a rope over a limb of the tree and knot a hangman's noose around his bared neck.

BILLY saw Drunken Mike Bedloe smiling with satisfaction on the edge of the crowd.

Then he heard Doc Peasely say, "Got anythin' to say for yourself, Joe, afore we kick that box out from under."

"I didn't do it!" Carnavail cried out. I swear to Gawd, boys, I never done Uncle Joe in. So help me."

"He's dead right about that, Doc," Billy heard himself piping up in a strangely loud, high-pitched voice. He felt the pressing weight of the others' eyes as they all swung toward him. He felt the baleful glance of Drunken Mike Bedloe's black eyes, and saw the instinctive jab of Mike's hand toward his holstered six-gun.

Doc Peasely stroked his chin with a gnarled set of fingers and said slowly, "Keep talkin', Billy."

"I was in Uncle Joe's place when the old man was killed," Billy said. "I saw it all happen. It wasn't Joe Carnavail that did it, either."

"No?" said Doc Peasley. "Who, then?"

"Drunken Mike Bedloe."

Billy watched the careful poker face Mike Bedloe wore as the men banked their suprised glances toward the town ne'er-do-well. Billy had to give Mike credit. The man had nerve; he was an actor. He looked surprised at Billy's accusation as did any of the others.

"What do you say to that, Mike?" asked Doc Peasley.

"I'm laughing," said Drunken Mike. He wasn't, of course. He was scowling fiercely at Billy. "Unless the kid's joking. Look, Doc, what would the kid be doin' in Uncle Joe's place, just to start with? It don't make sense."

"Hmmmm," said the druggist, and turned toward Billy. "How about that, Billy?"

Billy was sweating. "I was tryin' to steal me a gun and some ca'tridges," he sighed limply.

Mike chuckled. "'Pears like it's all beginnin' to make some good sense, don't it, Doc? The kid was skulkin' in Uncle Joe's place, tryin' to steal hisself some hardware for shootin' purposes and Uncle Joe surprised him at it. They prob'ly had a scuffle an' the kid bashed the old man's head in."

"That's a lie," Billy sputtered, feeling his knees turning wobbly.

Doc said, "What did you want the gun for, Billy, if you ain't just makin' this whole thing up to save the skin of your friend Joe, here?"

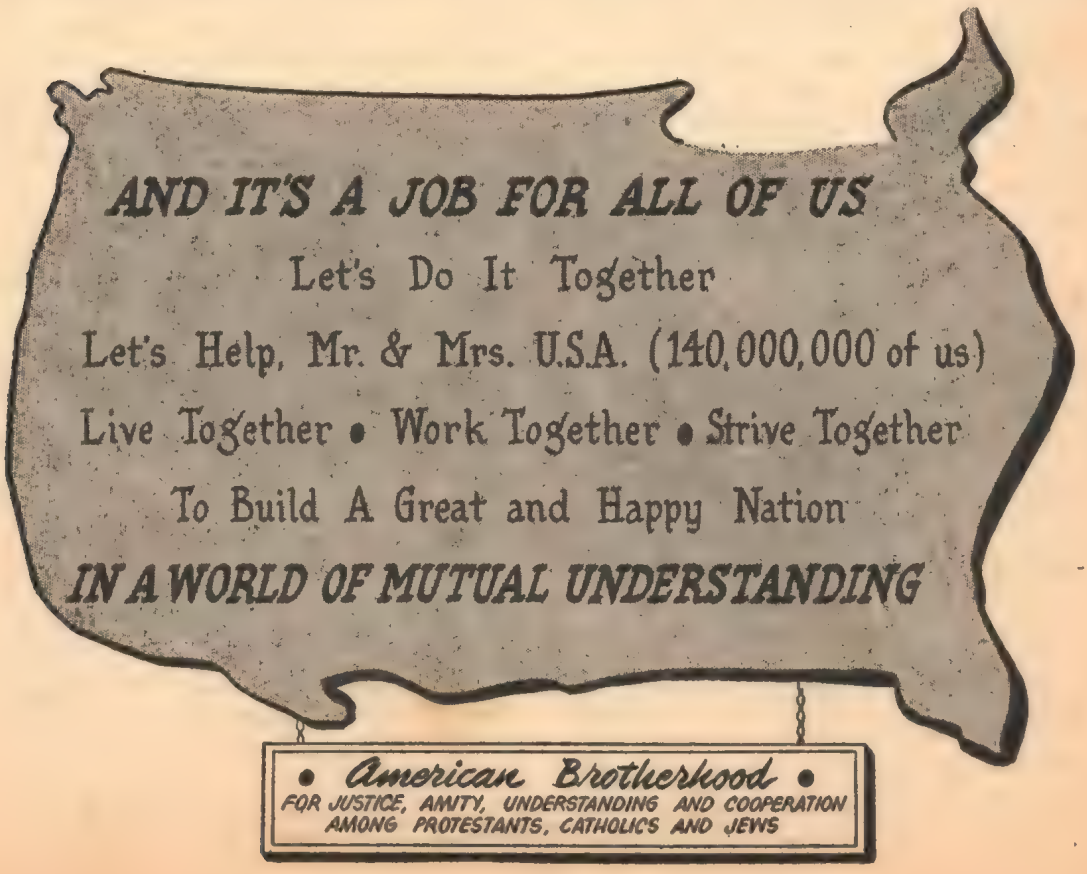
"I had a fight with him this very morning," said Billy, "down at the Straight Shot. He pulled a gun on me and chased me out. I figgered it was time I packed a gun myownself if folks was goin' to push me around. I didn't have no money to buy one so I determined to steal one. And that's how come I was there, and saw Drunken Mike bash Uncle Joe's head in."

"Hah!" Mike snorted. "If that ain't a cock-an'-bull story, I never—"

"Easy, Mike," said Doc Peasley, and looked hard at Billy. "You're getting yourself in pretty deep, kid. I hope you know that. You'll go to jail for a pretty long time if it turns out you're the guilty party. You say you had a fight with Joe at the Straight Shot this morning, hey? All right, we'll check that part of your story." Doc turned to Carnavail. "How about that, Joe? Did you an' the kid have a scrap this morning?"

"I don't know what the kid's talkin' about," rasped Joe. There was a burning hope in the man's eyes, and now Billy could look right through the bartender and see what made him tick. Joe was so yellow that he was clutching at any straw which would remove the nectie from his neck. He figured Billy was guilty, and trying to throw the blame onto Drunken Mike. Accordingly, Joe was trying to break down Billy's story, lying to do so, although Billy had just spoken up to save Joe's rotten life for him.

Drunken Mike laughed savagely, and said, "That does it, Doc. The kid's played right into our hands. Imagine the gall of that sassy litle sidewinder, tryin' to throw this thing onto me when all the time it was him that stove in Uncle Joe, all for a lousy six-shooter." He advanced toward Billy,


AND IT'S A JOB FOR ALL OF US
Let's Do It Together
Let's Help, Mr. & Mrs. U.S.A. (140,000,000 of us)
Live Together • Work Together • Strive Together
To Build A Great and Happy Nation
IN A WORLD OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING
• American Brotherhood •
FOR JUSTICE, AMITY, UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION
AMONG PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS AND JEWS

his pocked face working with savage hatred. "I oughtta gunwhip you, kid, for tryin' t' frame me with that cock-an'-bull story." He grabbed Billy by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Spit it out now!" he growled. "Confess while you still got the chance."

He suddenly pulled Billy close, squeezing the kid's shoulders, and rasped into Billy's ear, "Run, kid. Grab one o' them hosses down by the hotel. I'll back your getaway."

He flung Billy from him, fully expecting the kid to skeddaddle, but Billy knew the man for what he was, and understood exactly what was in Mike's mind. The man knew Billy's story could be made to stick if Doc Peasely questioned the kid any further. He *wanted* Billy to make a break for it, and the kid knew, without a trace of doubt, that Drunken Mike Bedloe's gun would be one of the first whipped out to cut him down and close his babbling mouth forever.

Billy did the only thing he could. He lowered his head and ran straight at Mike, butting him hard in the stomach. At the same time, Billy's agile hands were busy, clawing Mike's heavy gun from its holster. He held it in both his thin hands, pointed straight at the man's heaving chest, and said, "Turn out your pockets, Mike. Make him, Doc. I figure he's still got some of Uncle Joe Bannerman's money on him. He took it out of the register, after he bashed his head in with that plane."

"Why, you crazy little—" Mike blurted.

"Turn out your pockets, Mike," Doc Peasely suggested. "Might jest prove interestin', at that."

"I ain't gunna do no sech a thing," Mike stormed. "Not on this sassy kid's say-so. He's lyin', Doc. He—"

"Search him, boys," said Doc Peasley.

They did, and removed a trinkle of silver and a handful of greenbacks from the pockets. "Where'd you get it, Mike?" Doc Peasely asked.

"I—uh—I bin savin' it up," sputtered Mike. "I—"

Billy said, "He got thrown out of the Straight Shot last night, Doc, for cadgin' drinks off the cash-payin' customers."

"That's right," fluttered Joe Carnavail, on Billy's side once again now. "He was flat broke last night, Doc. Hey, lemme see them greenbacks. Does that one on top have a nick sheared off the upper right hand corner of it?"

Doc Peasley inspected the banknote and nodded. "What of it?"

"Uncle Joe dropped in for his usual beer last night, is all," said Joe Carnavail grimly. "He give me a five dollar bill, and I give him four ones in change along with some silver. One of them ones I give him had a nick off the corner just like that one. So I reckon that bill come out of Uncle Joe's till, sure as shootin'."

Drunken Mike's face turned ash-white in the face of this conclusive evidence. He stared at the hangrope around Carnavail's neck, gulped, and made a savage attempt to regain his freedom. He broke loose from the men who held him, ran six steps before a well-aimed shot from one of the party drove hard through his back, sent him sprawling into the dust in a grotesque, lifeless heap.

Billy Applegate turned his young eyes away. At that moment he suddenly lost his yen for the wild, reckless life he'd been leading. He had fought his way through to a proper, decent, and honest course of action, today, and he felt strangely proud of the way he had acted. Maybe it was time he started to toe the line, really, cut out the toughness and unyielding, embittered stubbornness with which, so far, he had greeted all attempts of this town to befriend him.

If he had not tried to steal that gun from Uncle Joe, he realized, he would have avoided all this trouble. And his own escape from the death which had caught up with Mike had been much too close for comfort. From now on, he would play the game of life straight down the middle.

"Doc," he said, "if that offer's still open ——I mean—about comin' to live with you, I—"

"Sure it's still open, kid," said the grizzled storekeeper. "You're a fine boy, son. Took real courage to come out agin Mike that way you just did. You're goin' to make a fine citizen for Andrus, Billy, now you've got that chip off your shoulder."

It was a plenty, darnfool, brave thing young Teague was doin' . . . but we all knew it wouldn't work.

Razorback Wrangler

By W. Scott Sheldon

You can trust a horse, and a longhorn, and sometimes, even a woman. But when it comes to those long-snouted, long-tailed, long-bellied razorback hawgs, brother brasadero, step nimbly and shoot quick and straight.

YOUNG TEAGUE SAW OUR VISitor coming five miles off and ran like a Neuces steer to the house to tell Tina. That fool boy was always looking for an excuse to see her. Which is kind of funny when you think of it, because any hand with all his senses corraled will usually avoid the boss as much as possible.

"Miss Rice!" he kept shouting, "Here he comes. Bryce Miler's comin' ".

She stuck her head out of the doorway about the time Teague made the porch and the crazy kid blushed and folded himself around the post and stomped on his own toes like they were rattlesnakes. You might think Tina was twice his age, but neither of them was much over twenty one, as a matter of fact. Tina just seemed a lot older because running her Daddy's spread all by her lonesome for a couple of years had gentled and wised her considerable.

I put the water bucket down and squinted at the dust cloud down the trail, but couldn't see much. My peepers hadn't been very sharp for several years, now, which was one reason I was a roustabout on the ZR instead of a cowhand at a larger and better paying spread. That and maybe a soft spot for Zebulon Rice, the old coot, and young Tina.

She called to me from the porch. "Laredo! Laredo Simms!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Get everybody busy. Anything. Out here where Mr. Miler can see 'em when he comes."

I snorted, and said: "If you say so ma'am," left the water bucket where it was and moved off slowly to round up Ysidro and Uncle Hip. That was who Tina meant when she said everybody.

Young Teague faded away from the porch then, stumbling all over himself and trotted up alongside me. I looked at him cornerwise. He was plenty lean but that short nose and wide, low-slung chin gave a filled-out look to his face. His hair was silver blond, soft as a baby's and I don't think it had ever shook hands with a comb. I grinned a little. "When you gonna tell Tina yo're sweet on her, Billy?"

"I ain't sweet on nobody!" His ears got hot. "And you mind yore own business, you old mossy head."

I laughed and let it go. We found Ysidro and Uncle Hip behind the shack not woke up yet from the siesta they'd started four hours ago. I had to out-argue Ysidro in his own language, but Uncle Hip just sighed, scratched his dark, woolly head and limped off to the front of the house. By the time Bryce Miler come near they was both pretending to mend the wood fence, Billy Teague was cleaning a bridle and I had picked up a water bucket again.

Tina smoothed her apron with her hands and come off the porch to meet the visitor as he was unforking.

NOW, I expect Young Billy Teague must think Tina Rice is pretty. I don't reckon he'd get all dogie-eyed over her if he didn't. Only, myself, I would be picking something more sophisticated like that dance hall gal I nearly spoke to once at the old Hord Hotel in San Antone. Tina had wide freckles all over her face and great big, wide blue eyes that always looked like they was being surprised at something. Top of that she stood solid and square and spoke up in a voice that carried clear into New Mexico.

Understand I'm talking about her looks now, I ain't low-regarding the gal. Any young female who can take over even a small spread like the ZR when her Daddy gets flat on his back from the ague is graded up high in my stud book.

This loan from Bryce Miler, for instance—she was handling that all herself. Old Zebulon would tremble out of his blankets long enough to sign everything, of course, but Tina would do the arranging. There was just one thing that had me scarey as a porch lizard; just one thing that made me kind of casual like sashay over to the window after Tina and Bryce Miler entered the house.

I wanted to see the expression on his face when he learned what kind of stock the ZR was raising.

Tina had wrote to him and give the address simply as the ZR ranch. Anbody would calculate from that that it was a cattle ranch like ninety nine out of a hundred. Only trouble was that cattle was selling for about $6.50 a head and their hides was worth more than their carcasses this year of 1873. A big spread could get by on that, but, like I said, the ZR was hardly bigger'n a mesquite bean in March. Tina had to do something and she done it. Now, the banks wouldn't loan no money in these times, and Bryce Miler, who had fought at New Orleans with old Zeb, was about her last hope.

Miler was in the rocking chair and Tina had took the straight back, but the first thing my eye raised was a pint bottle of "Milligan's Best Squirrel Whiskey" on the table. If I had known Tina was caching that somewheres about I would have tried

to swipe it long before this. Anyway, Miler poured himself some, lifted the glass, and said: "Shore you don't mind, Miss Rice?"

"Not at all, Mr. Miler." She give a smile which wasn't too different from that San Antone dancer's smile, at that. I guess all women know certain things by instinct. "It was sweet of you to ride all the way out here. By rights, I should have come to see you."

Bryce Miler laughed very hearty. He had a nice, deep voice that filled up the room like a spring rain, and even with the dust all over him he looked neat-harnessed in his long, black coat and hand made black boots. I expect he was nearly as old as Zeb, still sick in the back room, only he'd been luckier with his years. "Miss Rice," he said, "I'd have to come out here anyways so there was no sense in makin' two trips of it."

"Well, it was still nice even to consider our letter—"

"Dally in a minute, Miss Rice," Miler said, holding up a big, brown hand. "You'll find I'm really a selfish man, and I don't do nothing except as it's good business. Now, your father wrote and asked me to remember fightin' at New Orleans together. Shore, that's fine—and I don't mind a favor to an old comrade. But, as you know, Miss Rice, I'm runnin' for governor of the state and I expect the support of cattlemen because I'm for the cattleman, fust, last and always."

"Of course," Tina nodded. A little frown made sign at the center of her forehead. "Which reminds me, I wanted to tell you about—"

"Right now," said Miler, "the cattleman is havin' hard times. But it'll pass. And why?" He got up and slammed his paw on the table. "Because of the indomitable spirit of the cattleman. The spirit that made our state what it is today. It can't be beat."

"That's right. But—"

"You understand that comin' out here to inspect your stock is just a routine business precaution afore I lend you any money. But I'm shore my investment will be safe. I have faith in any cattleman, Miss Rice. I was raised in a sod hut in the prairie and I've rode every trail between here and the gulf, and I've done everything but tail a steer vaquero style."

"Mr. Miler, I've *got* to tell you—"

"Shucks, not now, Miss Rice." He dropped into the rocker again, and smiled his best Fourth of July day smile. He touched the bottle of Milligan's again, looked up for permission and Tina nodded quickly. While he was pouring the second, he said: "We can talk business in the morning, and I can inspect your stock at the same time. When's that scaly horned Pappy of your'n going to get well enough so's I can see him and find out what lies he's tellin' about New Orleans these days?"

"I'll—I'll see if he's awake now," said Tina. That frown was still there when she left the room. I hauled freight away from the window then and chomped on both of my lips. It looked like Mr. Miler thought "cattle" and its nicknames was the only words in the English language. And it looked like he was going to be mighty peaked when he found out just what our stock was, and it looked like that loan was as good as gone and come summer me and the others would be waltzing for other parts where wages was regular.

I OFFERED to saddle one of the brush broke critters from our own remuda for Mr. Bryce Miler the next morning, but he insisted on taking his own black willow tail along. I squinted at him and said to myself: "Maybe you've rode every trail to the gulf, Mr. Miler, but you shore must have missed the brasada. I just hope both you *and* the horse get back."

I could tell that Tina hadn't got herself a chance to tell him about our stock, yet, because he was still spouting about cattle and cattlemen. They was to be trusted above all other people. They was the salt of the earth. They had the wind in their face and the starlight in their eyes.

Billy Teague looked open jawed at him, and then stared at Tina and back at Mr. Miler again. Finally he caught my eye. I shrugged and looked away. He poked his hat far back on his head so that silver blond hair all come out in front like a water fall, then reined over alongside Tina making believe he was just checking her bridle. Both Ysidro and Uncle Hip tagged along behind on a couple of broomies that looked like mighty sorry animals until you peeked at their legs close and saw the scars from junco and cholla thorns. Then you

knew they wasn't just open-prairie mounts.

We started at a jog.

"This here's the life!" Miler's rich voice called out. "Been years since I choused a mean-eye! Take my advice, you hombres and don't never get tangled up in town politics—takes all your time."

That give me a pretty good idea just how much of a cattleman Mr. Miler really was. I'd known cattlemen since Cortina was raiding the border and I ain't never heard none of them do anything but plain and fancy cuss the business, even though they wouldn't have nothing else.

Tina come up beside me. "Where first, Laredo?"

"There's a big pack over to Gunsight Pass," I said, pointing. She nodded, then, and dropped back to Miler's black willow tail. All the way out he kept talking about cattle, and every once in a while I could hear Tina trying to bust in and tell him the truth about the ZR, only trying to bust in on that flood of jaw music was like trying to swim the Pecos in January.

So when we finally come to the big patch of brush at the foot of the pass, I reined in, turned around and took a breath longer than an Indian bronc's tail. "The pack's some'rs in there," I said.

Mr. Miler got bean pole straight in the saddle. "In there? In that brasada? Why, a steer couldn't feed overnight on them thorns!"

I looked over at Tina and her blue eyes were high-scary, her freckles showing plain against a white face. But she nodded for me to go ahead. I bit another hunk of air and fixed Miler straight in the eye: "They ain't steers, Mr. Miler," I said.

"Huh? What? Not steers?"

"No, sir."

"What's going on here? You all look mighty funny? If they ain't steers what are they?"

"Hawgs, Mr. Miler," I said, "Long snouted, long tailed, long bellied, razorback hawgs."

I guess I might just as well have said that General Sherman was a great man and that I liked to sleep with sheep critters. The whole danged range suddenly got as silent as Heaven, and Bryce Miler's thick jaw dropped nearly to his saddle horn.

"Hawgs?" The word come out of him like a flash flood. "But I thought—"

Tina was suddenly leaning toward him. "I tried to tell you, Mr. Miler—tried to tell you ever since yesterday. But you wouldn't give me a chance. I—"

"Hawgs," he said, shaking his head like he'd been hit on it, "Hawgs."

"I tell you, there's a profit in it." Tina was talking fast. "They pay good prices for them at the packeries and they're all over the land here, fattened up, feeding all winter. All we have to do is get dogs, and round them up, then drive them to the coast. Why, they even feed them on cow carcasses there—"

That done it. That was the final blasphemy so far as Mr. Miler was concerned. "Feed hawgs on cow carcasses!" he roared, "Why any critter I caught doin' that, I'd skin him alive and feed him to the hawgs!"

Tina just plain shrank back against the saddle. She kept on staring at Mr. Miler, but she knew she was licked now, and the rest of us knew it, too. Young Teague loped up to her and sat a few feet off looking helpless, like he didn't know whether to put his arm around her or not. Uncle Hip dropped his woolly head.

Only Ysidro did any moving. He had been hanging off to one side doing his usual trick of listening to conversation and smiling and nodding although he could hardly savvy one word out of ten. He just didn't like to be left out of whatever was going on. Now he grinned at Miler, spurred his old, cut-up horse and called out: "Senor! I show you! Is fine pig! *Si, si!*" Then he was hauling freight, full-tilt, for that patch of brasada.

"Hey, Ysidro! Come back here!" The fool pelado had some idea in his mind that he was going to help, but just how, I couldn't figure. Don't ask me ever to figure either a mustang or a Mexican. Nearest I could guess was that he was going to tail on to a small pig and drag it out and show Miler how fat it was, only that was biting off a mighty large and a mighty hard chew. If you ever had wild razorbacks on your land you know they travel in packs, maybe fifty, sixty head, and you know the sow guards her pigs like an alligator with deer's legs, and the boar guards everything like three alligators fixed likewise with a couple of garfish throwed in. Only dogs—and danged high-trained dogs at that, can get them out.

YSIDRO didn't, or pretended he didn't hear me. I lit out after him, and heard the others come along behind me.

We pulled up at the edge of the thick growth. There was cracking and popping inside and I judged from the sound of it that Ysidro had already spotted a pig and was after it. I looked at Tina. "He's only tryin' to help out, ma'am."

She nodded anxious. "But if he gets off his horse—oh, I hope—"

"Powder on Betsy!" swore Miler, shaking his head slowly and sadly, "all this fuss over a hawg. What would you folks do with a herd of longhorns?"

Billy Teague snapped his head at the man, like it was a slingshot. "Starve!" he said, "like every other rancher around here!" He said it hot and mad, with poison oak sap dripping from the words.

I reckon Billy must have been near murdering mad. Miler, after all, was an older gent and a kind of influential one, and lots of people with more in their pack rolls than Billy was polite to him, just out of manners, if nothing else. Only I liked Billy for it. It showed he was developing something else besides a strong back and a friendly grin. Miler just kind of snorted, and right then, there come a scream from the brasada like a catamount had got loose in a saxhorn band. We all of us snapped forward in our saddles.

Ysidro came running from between two mesquite trees, his face all snarled with fright and the white showing broad around his dark eyes. His little bow legs was pumping faster than the Devil beating tan bark. Right on his worn down heels was the biggest, rangiest boar I had ever seen in this, or any country; curving, twisted tusks, dripping saliva, and a big, long trumpeting squeal coming out of him. It put fuzz all up and down my backbone to hear it.

I didn't stop to think what maybe had happened; I just about lifted that brush-popping horse of mine off the ground with my spurs. I thought I was quick—but by the time I moved, Billy Teague was already halfway there. I seen his six gun move in the air. Then I done this split-second thinking about things a fellow seems able to do when things are fast-happening. Billy had two choices to keep Ysidro from being tusked: he could rope that critter, or he could shoot him. Maybe I should say he could *try* either one of these. Well, like any brasadero, Billy hauled only a twenty five foot rope, any longer was useless in the brush. And a buck hog, snout on the ground can be hell to rope. On the other hand shooting with a six gun from a larruping horse ain't no way to get marksmanship medals. And there was only one or two spots a bullet would do any good on a razorback, anyways; that side skin and gristle of his'n, what we called the "shield" was over a inch thick and I'd seen it stop a bullet more than once. It seemed then that a rope wouldn't do no good, and a bullet maybe wouldn't do no good. Looks like that made a bullet the best bet on the two.

Billy's gun made noise.

That boar didn't pay no more attention than as if someone had threw a pebble at him—he closed up the space between him and Ysidro, shoveling that long snout from side to side so's the tusks waved like cavalry swords. I had my own six gun out by this time and was holding it stiff-arm, aiming it. Only the boar was so close now that Ysidro, himself, was just about on the sight, too—

Then Billy was flying from his saddle, his long tow hair looking like the streamer on a war lance. He hit the ground on all fours, shouting and hullooing at that boar, trying to coax him off'n Ysidro. It was a plenty, damfool, brave thing, only it was a little too late.

I watched that boar gash Ysidro and I watched the blood come. I listened to Ysidro's screams shake the wax in my ears. I just watched. Afterwards I knew I'd get sick and maybe bawl like a baby, but I'd taught myself just to watch when things like that happened.

Billy, close by, and in a way to aim, sent two more shots into that animal. By rights he should have either fell dead, or charged Billy, but I'd hate to lay money bets on what a razorback hog will do next. This one rippled from snout to tail like a sunfishing bronco, then turned complete around and sashayed for the brush again.

"Git him, Gilly!" I called, "He'll tear up—"

Billy was already raising his gun. He knew as well as me that that devil hog would root and tear and murder in there

among the others, now he was wounded. Billy used both hands on his gun to steady it, then fired. That hog kept on going.

I UNFORKED and dropped right at Ysidro's side; Billy trotted toward me and I heard the hoof noises of the other horses. Behind me, the gasp Tina gave was short and knife sharp. I looked up and shook my head, then stood, my back turned to Ysidro.

"Poor—poor Ysidro," Tina said. Her blue eyes were very wide open, and there wasn't a wet place in them, but a big, long tremble started at her shoulders and shook her all the ways down to the wooden tapaderos on her stirrups.

Bryce Miler moved around in his saddle all itchy and uncomfortable like, and I had the funny idea he would have knew what to do better if Tina had clumb all over herself and bellered and carried on like lots of women might have done. He said: "Well, it's only a pelado, Miss Rice. He should have known how to stay on his horse."

Now, I can call Ysidro a pelado, and young Billy and Uncle Hip can, and that was all right, because we called each other worse things some times. But no stranger carries the right to insult any of our hands like that, and when Miler said them words I could feel the backs of my hands tingle. Billy turned around slowly and faced him.

"How can you say that?" Tina asked.

Miler shrugged. "A good cow hand wouldn't have got himself in that fix."

I should have known that the quiet, kind of scratchy way Billy spoke in next meant trouble. "A cow hand such as yourself, Mr. Miler?" he asked, very polite-like.

There was just a small band between Billy's words and Miler's answer and I could hear that boar in the brush still squealing and rampaging about. Then Miler kind of half smiled and said: "Well, now look here, I don't mean to low rate you folks, or anything. It's just that I put my stakes on the cattle man. And—"

"Mr. Miler," said Billy, still softly, "that boar's still in there, killin' stock."

"Yes?"

"He ought to be stopped, I'm thinkin'."

"Well?"

"You and me could go in there and stop him, Mr. Miler—*if you got the guts!*"

Bryce Miler just stared for a moment out of his tan, handsome face. Then he nodded. "All right," he said, "Let's go." He kicked his horse around and headed it for that mess of roots and thorns right off.

"Billy, no!" said Tina, but I eased over and put a hand on her arm to save her from wasting breath. She angled her head down at me and the worry was sitting heavy on her eyebrows. "Go after them, Laredo. Take care of—of Billy."

"Shore." I nodded, then turned quick and hairpinned on to my horse. In a moment I was dirt pounding after them.

Well, that patch of brasada was even too thick to cuss a cat in. I had to ride shifting from one side to the other, sometimes hanging out of the saddle alongside the belly of the horse to keep from getting swiped off. The fool critter knew how to dodge it, though, and I swear he was almost having a high time. Thorns and branches chonked into my leggin's and slapped by, I could hear the noise when they scraped my ducking jacket, and once a thorn switch caught me hard across the cheek, burning like a branding iron.

Both Billy and Miler was just a squirrel call ahead of me, and in between the crashing of their horses and mine, I could hear the long, banshee squeal of that wounded boar and the shorter, skinny-scared squeals of a few others. Then there was movement off to left, and I caught a squint of his patchy flank moving along. Miler gave a yahoo and reined his horse over that way. "I raised him!" Miler said.

"Where at?" Billy wanted to know.

"Over here—head him off—we'll drive him out—"

Billy's mount twisted around to the far side of the animal. There was no use trying to shoot him here in the brush; all you'd be likely to hit was spikes and branches, but once they got him in the open they'd be able to ride him down. I joined in and kept the near side covered.

MILER had took his black hat off, now, and was hooting and waving it in the air. I could have told him his cattle tricks wouldn't work on a near-sighted boar, but it wouldn't have done no good. And I expect his horse didn't know no more about thicket riding than Miler did.

Because just about then that she willow tail run herself in a knee high thorn bush, and just plumb folded downward, sending Miler over her head in as pretty a bird fly as I ever seen.

He was scratched up plenty; I could see the red on his face, but he payed no heed to that. He was on his feet in a finger-snap, and hauling his pistol into the air. Then I saw that hog, and I knew why. The animal had turned in its tracks; it swung its long snout this way and that, dug sharp hoof points in the ground, and there was a look in its eye meaner than gar soup thickened with tadpoles. I don't know whether it spotted Miler's big, black coated form, or smelled it. Anyways it sure headed for it, nose low, head and shoulders all covered with froth.

I was stirred up considerable, but not really worried. Charging Miler like that, the boar give him a perfect chance to shoot him in the head—one of the very few ways you could shoot the critter. But Miler, either he didn't know razorbacks or he got so plumb scared he couldn't think. He dropped his gun, turned around and started to high tail it through the thorns.

"No!" I yelled out, "turn around!"

Over by where Billy was the brush snapped and crackled as he tried to push his horse through to that boar. I was too far away to be any good, myself. And then Billy must have seen that his broomie wasn't going to make it, because he stood himself up in the saddle and took a long jump across a *junco* hedge, and landed on his hands and knees, almost smack between Miler's running form and that charging boar. He rooted for his pistol then, fell over and got his hand tangled between himself and the ground. That pistol was a long time coming out. That boar was a short time getting to Billy.

I guess Billy was too close to me; I guess I forgot all about how I'd trained myself to blow my head after things was over, and not while they were happening. I let out a long, screeching yell that was a cross between a hoot owl and a weepy woman.

I saw the tusks flash, swinging from right to left. I felt in my own bones the way that long hog body—most all of it whippy muscle—quivered. And then I saw that Billy was moving, too, only so fast I couldn't tell which way from Adam's off-ox. I heard the shot, and it didn't sound near loud enough. Then I seen the boar's head, gaunt as a gutted snow bird's, slice back and forth a couple more times, and he was suddenly staggering off in another direction. I guess he took five, maybe six steps before he dropped. Billy just lay there, his pistol hand still raised, his eyes looking dumb and wide at the red stain on his leg.

Well, Billy never let out a peep all the way back home, although I reckon it started to hurt long before we got him there. I stopped the flow much as I could with rope, and used up most of my shirt for bandage. We found a couple of saplings about as straight as you'll ever find in the brasada and made a drag litter, Indian style, out of them and a saddle blanket. But what I was going to say was, even though Billy never said nothing, and Tina, who kept riding alongside him, never opened her mouth, neither, I didn't need no lecturer on a platform to tell me what was going on between them.

Miler, of course, talked his fool head off. It was all right, though, what he said wasn't hard to hear at all. "I reckon any folks with as much guts as you hawg raisers can make a go of most anything. Looks like a good investment to me." That was the gist of it.

So I rolled me a cigarette and rode and smoked it and just thunk a while. Ysidro was buried, and Uncle Hip, on his horse, was sleeping again and both Billy and Tina didn't know nobody else in the world existed.

I sure hoped I could find sort of a side-kick among the extra hands we'd be hiring. Because the way things was going Billy would be helping Tina boss before long, and, like I say, any hand with all his senses don't go looking up the boss any more than he has to.

THE LAST RIDE OF POTHOOKS MARRS

By Les Savage, Jr.

Is the width of the Texas plains, or the winding length of the dusty Chisholm Trail big enough to hide the stinkin' backtrail of a drygulcher? One of 'em thought so—Pothooks Marrs, hot target-bait of the King Colts parade.

BOB SLAUGHTER CAME awake with someone touching him, and grabbed for his gun. Then, with his hand on the weapon, his sleep-fogged vision was filled with a woman's face—windblown taffy hair framed large, grey eyes, and the damp, ripe curve of a rich underlip.

"Gail," he snapped. "Don't you know how to wake a man on the trail yet. I might have thrown down on you."

"All right, Bob," she panted angrily. "Next time I'll stand ten feet back and pelt you with a pebble. The crew's hoorawing the cook down in the river. You've got to stop it. They're mad enough to drown him."

"Not again," groaned Slaughter, pulling himself out of his sougan, fully dressed. He was near forty five, but his long, driving legs in the rumpled striped pants, and his lean pivoting waist held the hard, vital youth of a man fifteen years his junior.

Following Gail through the smoldering cookfires, he ran his hand roughly across the strong, cutting thrust of his jaw, feeling the greasy blond stubble. His long yellow hair fell over a belligerent brow, and the impatient toss of his head, throwing it back, flashed chill little lights across his hard blue eyes. The movement made him wince. A dull ache shot through his temples, and he squinted his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. Either the liquor was getting stronger in Dallas, or he was getting older, he didn't know which. He must have slept right through the fuss this morning.

They skirted the untended trail herd, and Gail pushed through the elderberry. Even in his vague stupor, Bob felt the keen appreciation of her presence. Hair that hung like rich strands of taffy down over her shoulders, and the faded blue cashmere robe failed to hide the mature rondure of her hips, the lissome motion of a body every man on the Chisolm Trail talked of. She had been married to Paul Butler for

H. B.
VESTAL

ten years, and for three years Slaughter had bossed their Pickle Bar trail herds north to the Kansas markets, and each year he thought she became more desirable to him.

They burst from the brush onto the rich, mucky soil of the Trinity bottoms, and could hear the men shouting and milling around in the shallows of the river. In their midst, Slaughter could make out the surging, struggling figure of the cook. Don Vargas was the vaquero who claimed to be descended from Spanish royalty—a lithe, slim whip of a youth in fancy taja leggin's and a frogged charro jacket — hopping around on the fringe and shouting.

"Dunk him again, he's been cutting pieces off my saddle for those atrocities he calls steaks ever since we left the Nueces."

The peg-legged man holding the cook by his shirt front had been dubbed Pata Pala by Don Vargas, which meant Stick Foot in Mexican. Despite his handicap, he was the best all round hand in the crew, and the bully of them to boot. He straddled the biscuit shooter and put his head under water again.

"Let him go," shouted Slaughter, descending on them in a vicious, long, legged stride.

"Stay out of this, Slaughter," called Waco Garrett, holding one hand across his belly as if to ease the pain of some old internal injury so many brush hands carried within them. "You can't palm a pothooks like this off on us. My system's so saturated with that hog belly he's cooked for beef that I sweat straight leaf lard and my hide's so slick I can't keep my leggin's on."

"Leave go of him, I said," roared Slaughter. Reaching the crowd, he pulled Windy aside with one sweeping arm to get at Pata Pala. Windy staggered back and sat down in the water, his mop of white hair falling over his eyes. Slaughter hooked one hand in the peg-leg's belt and heaved backward. Pata Pala let go of the cook and whirled about before he lost balance. He was taller than Slaughter's six foot one, and twice as big around the waist, a great, beefy bully of a man with a matted roan thatch and a stubble beard so filled with grease and dirt its color was indeterminate. He caught Slaughter's arm in one hand. Slaughter slugged him in the belly. Pata Pala grunted, bent toward Slaughter, raking for his face. Slaughter pulled the Navy Colt from his belt and laid it across the man's face. Pata Pala toppled sideways with a heavy groan, and Slaughter jumped on by him before he struck the ground.

Solo Sam had grabbed the sputtering cook, jamming a sopping wet hat into his face, and Windy had risen to boot the biscuit shooter in his behind. They both stared at Slaughter, and released the cook, jumping back.

"Now," said Slaughter, holding the gun for whipping, "if anybody else wants to hooraw this pothooks, let him come ahead. I'll whip strips off his face and make jerky of it." They spread away from the choking, gasping cook, staring sullenly at Slaughter. "Vamoose, then," he said, finally. "Get back to camp and catch up. If this is what you want, we'll ride without breakfast."

PATA PALA rose sullenly, holding the bloody weal cutting its livid swath through one cheek. His little bloodshot eyes held Slaughter's gaze for a moment; then, without speaking, he wheeled sharply and walked as fast as he could up the bottom slope, hitching the hip of that peg leg forward with each step. The others followed, one by one, until only the cook and Slaughter were left in the water.

"Now get back to your chuck wagon," said Slaughter. "And do something about that cooking of yours."

"There won't be any more cooking," sobbed the bow-legged, bald-pated little man. "I'm through, Slaughter."

"The hell you are," said Slaughter. "You know we can't get another range cook in this town. You're staying, belly cheater, or I'll lay this dewey on you too."

"Go ahead," snarled the man. "You can beat me all day. It still won't make me stay."

With a curse, Slaughter lunged at him, but Gail cried out from farther up the bank, and slopped into the shallows to grab at him. "Slaughter, let him alone. Haven't you gone far enough already?"

"Far enough! What the hell did you want me to do, kiss their boots?"

"Haven't you got any diplomacy in you?" she said hotly. "You can't drive men like a bunch of cattle, Slaughter. Maybe that had a legitimate quarrel here. You

didn't even stop to reason with them."

"You don't know men like I do," he said. "I've been bossing crews for ten years, Gail, and commanding troops for five before that. You've got to make them respect you."

"It isn't respect you win by whipping them at every turn," she said. "You've got to do something more than that. They may fear you and jump whenever you yell, Bob, but I wouldn't call that respect."

He realized the cook had left. He caught her elbow, moving her out of the water, putting a check on his anger with great difficulty. "Gail, let's not quarrel like this. I don't want to quarrel with you, you know that. Every boss has a way of handling his men. This is just my way, that's all. It's always worked out."

She stared up at him. "What is it that keeps you driving so hard, Bob? You're afraid to let down one minute. You're past forty, yet you drive yourself like a man half your age."

"A man has to keep stepping to stay at the top," he said.

"Is that it?" she said. "Are you that afraid of slipping?"

"Afraid? Why should I be afraid?"

"I think you are," she said.

He felt the old discomfort under the candid, searching probe of her quiet gray eyes. "You're being very mysterious," he said. "I don't want to talk this way with you. Gail—" his voice sobered— "how is Paul?"

She accepted the abrupt transition without issue, her face darkening. "About the same," she shrugged. "That jolting wagon isn't helping him much."

"Why do you stick with that whining little baby, Gail?"

"He's my husband, Bob."

"He hasn't been your husband for five years and you know it," he said. "He's just been a name on the Pickle Bar checkbook. You've run the outfit as long as I've worked for it. He's just been a whining sniveling bundle of rags in one bed or another to sit beside and nurse and—"

"Bob!"

"It's time I spoke out," he said, facing the horror in her eyes. "Don't let any false sentiment come between us, Gail. I know you feel the same way I do. I hear him going for you in that wagon. You don't get a word of thanks. It's all whining and swearing and berating, like an old woman. I don't understand what you saw in him in the first place."

Her eyes seemed to focus on something beyond him, and her voice was barely audible. "He was very handsome."

"When are you going to quit, Gail? You don't owe him anything. He doesn't deserve your life. Waco Garrett leads a normal life with that injury of his. He does the work of two men with his belly hurting him so much most of the time he can't even see. Pata Pala makes out fine with only one leg. They don't go to bed everytime it starts bothering them. If Paul can't face it like a man, it shouldn't—"

"Bob, stop it."

"I won't. You were meant for something more than that, Gail. You need a man."

Her brows raised. "You, Bob?"

He took her elbows, lifting the weight of her body toward him. "You know how I feel, Gail."

"I can see you don't know how *I* feel, Bob," she said, pulling away from him. It was no violent effort, but it held an unyielding insistence that caused him to release her. "What makes you keep thinking Paul is the only reason I haven't turned your way?"

A THOUSAND cattle was shifting about nervously on the bed ground, cropping at weedy grass in a vain effort to fill their bellies. Bob Slaughter moved back through them moodily, a few minutes after Gail had left him there in the bottoms and returned to camp herself. The whole camp was ominously silent until Guy Bedar showed up, coming from behind the chuck wagon on his hairy little day horse. Narrow enough to take a bath in a shotgun barrel, he had a face as sharp as a Karankawa war hatchet, and kept his lips clamped shut so tight they made a jumptrap look slack. The tattered brim of his horse thief hat was pinned back against a crown so filthy it looked black, his leather ducking jacket was streaked with grease and tobacco juice, his leggins were caked with mud and dropping.

"Where is everybody?" Slaughter asked him.

"Most of the crew went into Dallas for a meal," said Bedar. "Told me they wouldn't come back till you got them a decent cook. Incidentally, a man named Rickett would like to see you over by the grub wagon."

The chuck outfit was about twenty yards this side of the linchpin wagon in which Paul Butler had kept his sick bed since taking cold and a fever on the Colorado near Austin. The two men standing on this side of the chuck wagon would be unseen from the linchpin. One of them was a short, thickset man in a black Prince Albert and a black string tie. He had a square, open face and guileless blue eyes and lips with such a facile twist they reminded Slaughter of the fluted edge around the crust of a pie.

"I'm Harry Rickett," he said. "Perhaps you've heard of me. Or of Thibodaux."

The man he indicated leaned against a wheel in languid indifference, something creole to the almost womanish beauty of his long-lashed eyes, staring at Slaughter without seeming to see him. The simple black butt of his gun held a quiet, professional competence.

"I've been trying to remember where I'd seen you," Slaughter told Rickett. "You used to run a faro layout in the Alamo."

Rickett's smile faded. "A man has to start somewhere. You should see the Alamo now, Slaughter. Quiet as a churchyard. All of Abilene's dead, for that matter. You know, some claim it was the quarantine regulations and the opposition of the farmers that drew the cattle trade away from Abilene and caused it to decline as a cowtown. But those who really know, date the beginning of that decline from the year you decided to drive the Pickle Bar to Ellsworth instead of Abilene. Twenty trail bosses followed your lead. I never believed the stories they told about you till then. They said you were the biggest man on the trail. The first up the Chisolm every spring, the spearhead for the whole bunch."

"Do you always grease the axle?" said Slaughter.

"I'm not laying it on *that* thick," grinned Rickett. "It's the truth, and you know it. A man with your reputation, driving for one of the most famous outfits on the trail, constitutes sort of a guiding star. That's why I've come to you, Slaughter. You know what happens to the gambling interests when the cattle stop coming to a town like Abilene. They fold up. They lose money. Not only do they stop making it, their original investments go down the drain. A lot of headaches, Slaughter, a lot of lost fortunes. It happens to every cowtown. The trail keeps bending west, and it keeps happening over and over again. Coffeyville, Baxter Springs, Abilene. And now it's happened to Ellsworth. The quarantine line has been moved west of town. Certain far-sighted interests had seen what happened to Abilene and the others, and had prepared to pull out of Ellsworth in time. But this quarantine law fouled up their plans. If no cattle are driven to Ellsworth this spring, the interests I represent will go under with as disastrous results as they did in Abilene."

"And you want me to buck the quarantine?" said Slaughter.

"Isn't he perspicacious, Thibodaux?" asked Rickett.

"Perspicacious," said Thibodaux.

Rickett saw the flush start creeping up Slaughter's neck, and held up a placating hand. "They'll follow you, Slaughter. If you push on to Ellsworth and show this quarantine deadline up for the foolish thing it is anyway, the other trail bosses will be right on your hocks. Five hundred cowboys in the Lone Star district, Slaughter. Listen to the lion roar and buck the tiger. Nothing like a booming trail town for high-heel times."

"The quarantine law isn't such a silly thing when there's an army of inspectors and officials backing it up," said Slaughter.

"Not quite an army," pouted Rickett. "Maybe they'd let you slip by anyway, if their palms got a little oily."

"From your money?" asked Slaughter. "What about the grangers? You couldn't pay them off. There's too many."

"You've pushed through worse things than a few sodbusters with rusty old Greeners," said Rickett. "What about the time Jared Thorne and his jayhawkers tried to stop you?"

"I lost half the herd and half my crew," said Slaughter. "Which is just what would happen here. It's always the cows that suffer."

"What's a few cows?" said Rickett.

"When the other bosses saw you got through, there'd be twenty outfits coming into Ellsworth. With that many on the trail, the farmers wouldn't stand a chance."

"That would be after I got through," said Slaughter. "Losing that many cows would put Pickle Bar on the red side of the ledger for this year. They're skating on thin ice already. I think it would finish Butler if he didn't show profit for this drive."

"It wouldn't finish you," said Rickett. "You'd have enough to establish an outfit of your own, Slaughter. Bigger than the Pickle Bar ever dreamed of being. Get through to Ellsworth and the interests I work for would see to that."

"They won't get a chance to," said Slaughter. "I may have had my high-heel times, Rickett, but when the last boot is empty, no man can say I bunch-quit the outfit I worked for."

"YOU'RE getting along, Slaughter," said Rickett. "There won't be many more years of bossing an outfit this size for you. It takes a young man. What then? Back to twenty and found in a puncher's saddle. Look what happened to Bert Pierce. Almost as big a man as you on the trail, Slaughter, in his day. They say he's swamping for some saloon in Wichita now. A lot of them go that way, Slaughter, when they get too old for rodding a job this tough."

"I'll be bossing a trail herd when you're getting pitched off a cloud, Rickett—" Slaughter halted his guttural explosion, surprised at the vehemence of it. He forced his voice to a strained mutter. "I don't want your proposition. I'm turning west at Red River for Dodge City."

"I've told you the example you provide for the other drivers," said Rickett. "Reach Ellsworth and they'd follow your lead. On the other hand, Dodge City isn't established as a trail town yet. They'll be watching you on that route, too. If you didn't make it to Dodge, a lot of them would turn back to Ellsworth."

"Is that a threat?"

"You interpret it any way you choose," said Rickett. "For my part, I'm just trying to show you how, either way, you'd provide an example. Jared Thorne and his jayhawkers are still active up there, Slaughter. They're a lot stronger than the year they tried to hooraw you. Last year they tied Pie Cameron to a tree and whipped him to death. When his hands found Pie, they turned back to Texas and left the whole herd for Jared. A lot more grangers over that way, too. Snaky. Mean. Organized. Just as liable to shoot a cowhand as not on sight."

"If you put a bug in their ear," said Slaughter.

"The interests I work for have connections in surprising directions," said Rickett. "They could throw a lot of things your way—or *in* your way. Why don't you reconsider? As I say, in either direction, you could provide the example which might well affect the other drivers. But one way you lose, and the other way you win? Only a fool would deliberately put the chips on a losing number."

"And where I win, the Pickle Bar loses," said Slaughter. "I told you where I stood, Rickett. I'm asking you to leave my camp now."

"Don't be a fool, Slaughter—"

"Will you get the hell out!" shouted Slaughter. He saw Thibodaux straighten unhurriedly from the chuck wagon, unlacing his fingers from across his belt buckle. Slaughter pulled his elbows back slightly until his hands were pointing inward by his hips, focussing attention on the butt of his gun thrusting its oak grips from the middle of his belt. "Go ahead," he told Thibodaux. "If that's what's in order now. I'd like you to. I'd like you to very much."

"Not now, Thibodaux," said Rickett. The flannel smile still curled his lips, but for a moment, in his eyes, Slaughter caught the hint of a raw, ruthless force that was totally out of keeping with the oily, genial surface of the man.

"But that doesn't necessarily mean never, Slaughter," said Rickett. "We'll let you sweat it out through the Indian Nations. That's a wild territory. Lots of things can happen there to change a man's attitude. And here's a thought to take along for the next time we meet. You make your living by what you can do with cattle, and you're one of the best in the game. Thibodaux makes his living by what he can do with a gun, and he's one of the best in the game. I know he would never be foolish enough to try and match you in your field. You'd

make him look very silly." He looked at Slaughter's gun butt. Then his eyes raised until they met Slaughter's, and that rippling smile filled his mouth. "I'm sure, after a little thought on the matter, you wouldn't really like him to. Would you now?"

II

EAST of the Texas and Pacific tracks, the streets of Dallas were filled with mud like slick black wax. Gail Butler turned her little bald-faced bay up Jackson Street, passing a freight outfit stuck hub deep in the ooze, wincing at the blistering profanity of the roaring, laboring teamster and his swamper as they tried to get the mud-caked mules to budge the immense Murphy. She saw Kettle Cory's hairy, heavy-rumped cutting horse hitched among several other animals before the Oxbow Saloon, and turned her mount into the rack. She looked at the mud beneath her feet, reluctant to get off, and bent over the saddle horn, trying to peer over the splintered batwing doors.

At this moment another rider appeared down the street in the same direction from which she had come, showering mud on the cursing teamsters as he cantered by them. It was Bob Slaughter, driving his horse in the same flambouyant, reckless way that he drove himself, pulling it up to a rearing halt before Gail.

"What are you doing in town?" he asked her.

"Trying to get my crew back before they get so drunk we'll be stuck here a week," she said. "And incidentally, looking for a cook. Kettle's in here. Help me off, will you?"

Reluctantly, Slaughter threw his rawhide reins over the dun's hammer head and stepped off, sinking halfway to his knees in the mud. She allowed herself to slide off one side of her animal into his arms. They were strong and hard about her body. She could not deny the excitement his intense masculinity stirred in her. Paul's arms were weak, flaccid.

Slaughter set her down on the plank sidewalk, but did not step back. She moved away from him, staring up into his face with a half-pout, half-smile. He was handsome, there was no denying that, with his blond, leonine mane, his chill, demanding eyes and thin, expressive lips, the deep cleft in his chin. *If you were only a little different, Bob, she thought. And if only there weren't Paul. And if only a dozen other things,* she concluded bitterly, drawing a deep breath and turning into the Oxbow.

The barkeep looked up in surprise, but she gave him no heed. She had been doing a man's work with the Pickle Bar too long to worry about the dubious impropriety of her presence in a place like this. Kettle Cory sprawled in a chair against the wall, a tall bottle of red bourbon on the table before him, half empty. He was a prodigious man, with a great kettle gut that was always forcing the tails of his red wool shirt out of his belt with its insistent, beefy rolls of fat. Gail had never seen him when he wasn't sweating. Perspiration rolled like tears from the veined, dissolute pouches of his little eyes, gathering in rivulets along the deep grooves formed by his ruddy, unshaven jowls, and seeping greasily into the clefts and crevices of his assortment of chins. He was dozing placidly, with his fat hands folded across his paunch and his muddy high-heeled boots spread out wide.

"Kettle," said Slaughter, shaking him.

The man opened his eyes without moving. They held a blue, lucid clarity that constantly surprised Gail, in such a gross beast. "You don't need to shake me," said Kettle through pouted lips. "I know you're here, Slaughter."

"Come back to camp, Kettle," Gail told him. "We'll get a decent cook. I want to move out of here by morning."

"Let me kill this soldier," said Kettle. "I'll be there when you need me."

"You're coming now," said Slaughter, grabbing the man again.

"I said you didn't need to shake me, Bob," said Kettle, without raising his voice.

Gail saw the flush filling Slaughter's face, and she put a hand on his arm, dragging it back. "All right, Kettle," she said. "I know you'll be there. Where are the others."

"Couple of them wandered in here," said Kettle. "Then Windy showed up with word they'd found a good place to eat. Bean Buster's Heaven, or something. Down at Jackson and Poydras."

"All right, Kettle," Gail told him. "I'm counting on you." She kept that hold on Slaughter, pulling him out through the doors with him and turning down the sidewalk toward Poydras. "Why do the other men always leave him alone, Bob?"

"He's one of the best all around hands I've ever seen," said Slaughter. "But he used to be a cattle inspector for the San Antonio Cattlemen's Association. You won't find many cowhands who cotton to those Association detectives."

"But he isn't with the SACA now," she said.

Slaughter shrugged. "The taint still remains. His personality don't help. As long as he does the work, that's all I care."

THERE was a sign above the false fronted building. Bean Buster's Heaven, it said, in faded letters. Solo Sam was sitting disconsolately on the curbing, holding his jaw.

"I think he busted every bone below my teeth," he mumbled. "You aren't going in, are you?"

"Who busted?" said Slaughter.

"Pothooks Marrs," said Sam. "The coosie in there, the belly cheater. He's got the rest of the gang trapped and won't let them go."

"Trapped?" Gail wheeled angrily into the open door. It was ominously quiet in the single, large room. There were half a dozen round tables at one side, but they weren't occupied. It seemed to Gail that her whole crew was sitting on the long-legged stools at the counter. Like a bunch of dry dogies staring at water beyond a fence, their attention was fixed almost painfully on the man standing beside a steaming griddle.

He was built along the lines of a bull. Not the gaunt, cat-backed, rangy Texas longhorn variety, with all the beef melted from them by years of running the brush. More like a surly, shortened Angus breeder that had wallowed too long in a rich pasture, sleek all over with too much tallow on his hips and ribs, but giving the sense of coiled, potent muscle beneath that tallow, with every motion he made. He even kept his head lowered like a ringy bull. His curly, dark-brown hair was thinning at the back of his head, and his neck was so thick a roll of leathery flesh pinched out over his dirty white collar every time he lifted his head slightly.

"Listen to them frijoles simmer," said Don Vargas, wonderingly. "Just like they used to sound in Juarez. I hope you're not cooking them gringo style. The Mexican way is the only way. The longer you cook them the better they are. And the chile. *Ay, que delicioso.* You break off the stems and roast the pods and steam them until they are tender, then you peel the meat away from the skins—"

"I'll cook the food," said the cook, without turning around. "You eat it."

"*Por supuesto,* of course, Senor Pothooks," said Don Vargas, placatingly, "I was just telling you—"

"You better not tell him anything, unless you want to git thrown out like Solo Sam," said Windy. "I never seen anybody like this since Pecos Bill. Did you ever hear about the time Bill got engaged to Slue Foot Sue. She insisted on riding Bill's horse, Widow Maker. Now she knew nobody else but Bill could ride that bronc, but no horse had ever throwed her, either, so—"

"Will you shut up," said Waco Garrett. "Them beans is boiling over, Pothooks."

"Yah," grumbled Pata Pala, "if you don't serve those steaks soon they'll start sprouting legs again and—"

"I told you I'd do the cooking," roared Pothooks.

Pata Pala reared up so hard his stool went from beneath him and the only thing that kept him from falling with it was his quick backward thrust of hips that slammed his good foot and the end of his leg onto the floor. Only then did Gail see what had caused him to jump like that. Where a moment before, nothing but the bare wood of the counter had been, the blade of a big meat chopper was now buried. Pata Pala had been sitting with both hands flat on the counter, about three inches apart, and it must have struck directly between them. It was made from an old machete that had been broken off halfway down to the hilt, leaving about six inches of the broad, wicked blade, looking like a broad-bladed hatchet.

Gail could not believe the cook had thrown it without looking, but she had not seen him turn, and now he was bent over the steaks on the griddle, rolling them in

batter one by one to pop in the oven. An utter silence had settled over the room. Windy's mouth was still open. The scrape of Pata Pala's stool was startling, as he dragged it back between his legs. Gail could not believe the man's violence alone held them in this awed silence. All of Slaughter's blows had never subdued them to this point. Then she saw the dirty plates before each one.

"If you're going to stay," whispered Solo Sam, thrusting his bruised jaw hesitantly through the door behind Gail. "Try and fix it up so I can get another one of them steaks too, hey?"

The hissing whisper, in that dead silence, turned the cook around, and Gail saw his face for the first time. The eyes matched the sullen dip of that head, heavy-lidded, somnolent, filled with a dark, smoldering violence that was veiled very poorly. He had a small dark mustache, and his lips did not move too much around the words.

"If you're eating, sit down. I'll get to you in a moment."

GAIL glanced wryly at Slaughter, moved to the end of the counter, seating herself by Windy. "What's going on," she said in a low voice. "I never saw anybody hornswaggle the whole bunch of you like this before."

"He can throw all the knives in the place," said Windy, "as long as he keeps on cooking them steaks. Ain't a one of us'd do anything to jeopardize this next batch coming up. You saw old pegleg. After a month of that last biscuit shooter, he'd crawl under a snake if it'd keep this kind of food coming our way. Pothooks Marrs this coosie calls himself. That's what Solo Sam got throwed out for. He started asking too many personal questions about the name."

Gail found her eyes on Marrs' hands, moving with swift, solid skill at his tasks, never a wasted motion. They were square and competent looking, with a faint fuzz of curly black hairs covering their weathered, sinewy backs. She had not realized the significance of the scars, at first. Now she saw that they were not the marks a man would get on the stove. Gail had lived among cowhands too long to be mistaken about rope burns. There were no fresh ones, but they would mark him for life. He served Gail's crew, and then came down to her, wiping his hands on a dirty apron.

"How long since you rolled biscuits on a chuck wagon?" she asked.

He stopped wiping his hands, and for a moment, there was a strange, poignant, almost stricken look in his eyes. Then that was obliterated by a sullen, angry defiance, and those heavy, bluish lids closed over his eyes till they were almost invisible. "I never cooked on a chuck wagon," he said.

"You ate at one," she said.

"Any man who hasn't shouldn't be in Texas," he said. "What's it to you?"

"Take it easy, belly cheater," said Slaughter. "The lady is interested in cooks right now. We're the Pickle Bar and we just lost our coosie."

"How much do you make here?" said Gail.

"If you came in to eat," said Marrs, "give me your order. If you came in to ask questions, there's an information booth down in the Texas Pacific station for that very purpose."

Slaughter started to bend across the counter, but Gail caught him by a shoulder. "All right. I won't ask questions. I don't care what you make. I'll double it, if you can keep my crew this happy as far north as Dodge City. I'll even give you a bonus if you go the whole way with us."

"I'm happy here," said Marrs. "There's plenty of cooks around."

"Not range cooks, and you know it," she said. "They're as scarce as black spots on albinos."

"When you find a black spot send me a letter," he said. "Do you want something to eat or don't you?"

"She wants you to answer a civil question," said Slaughter, kicking his stool back from under him, and this time Gail couldn't stop his lunge across the counter. He caught the front of Marrs' shirt and jerked him across the planking, starting to yell in his face. "Now tell the lady—"

It happened so fast after that Gail could not quite follow it. She heard the rip of cloth and saw Slaughter's hand in midair with a handfull of white cotton. Then Slaughter was staggering backward and Gail realized Marrs must have hit him in the face. Marrs didn't stop with that. He

grabbed a dishpan full of dirty china from under the counter and heaved the whole thing across the top at Slaughter. The trail boss was still staggering across the room, and had just been stopped by a table, when the dishpan and crockery struck him with a deafening clatter. He went backward over the table with the tin and china raining down over him and onto the floor, and the table collapsed too.

"Now get out, damn you," roared Marrs, whipping around to get a pot of boiling water and throwing it, pot and all, at the other men. "All of you, get out. Vamoose. Take a pasear. Empty the wagon—"

Howling with the boiling water in his face, Windy ducked the pot itself, and it clanged against the far wall. Then clean china began to rain down on them, and cutlery, and a dozen stools toppled as the crew made for the door, hands over their head.

Pata Pala was the only one who even tried to fight back. He grabbed that machete from where it had still been buried in the counter, and started running down toward the end. Marrs vaulted the counter and caught the peglegged man right there. Pata Pala came down with the flat of the blade at Marrs' head. The cook dodged in under it and struck Pata Pala's waist, knocking him back with such force that the man staggered clear back out into the street and fell in the mud.

Slaughter was starting to rise up from the wreckage across the room. He was still too dazed to do much but make a feeble pass as Marrs caught him by the belt, swinging him around, and shoving him toward the door. Slaughter tried to catch the doorframe and stop himself. Marrs scooped up a chair and threw it at him. It knocked the trail boss out across the sidewalk to fall on the peglegged man just as Pata Pala started to rise. Snorting through flared, fluttering nostrils, making guttural animal sounds deep down in that thick throat, Marrs swept the curly hair off his forehead with a vicious motion of one hand, wheeling back toward the counter. He must have forgotten Gail, for he stopped, unable to hide the surprise.

"Aren't you going to throw me out, too?" she said, drawing herself up high and trying to fill it with cold contempt.

"Lady," he said, standing spread-legged in the middle of the carnage, "if you don't go on your own two feet, right now, I sure will, very happily."

She stared at him for a moment. The humor of the whole thing had been pushing insistently upward in her since it started, and finally she could hold it down no longer. She lifted her chin to laugh.

"I have no doubts that you would," she said, and walked with as much dignity as she could summon to the door, turning there. "But don't forget, that offer still holds, twice what you're getting here, and a bonus. Our bed grounds are on the river south of town. Pickle Bar. Gail Butler."

"Get out!"

Slaughter wanted to go back inside and tear the man apart, and it took the whole crew to keep him from doing it. If he hadn't been so dazed from the dishpan, even that would not have stopped him. Finally Gail got him pacified, and moved down the street.

"I never saw a cook that wasn't ringy," said Windy, wonderingly. "But I never saw one that ringy."

"You must have touched him on a sore spot," Don Vargas told Gail. "If he punched cows, it was way back. He must have a good reason to keep him away from it that long. A lot of men with reasons that good are a little touchy about them."

"He won't show up on our outfit, that's sure," said Solo Sam.

"He'd better not," said Slaughter, viciously.

"On the contrary," said Gail. She was looking back toward Bean Buster's Heaven, and in her mind was a picture of that momentary, indefinable poignance in Marrs' eyes when she had mentioned the range and the chuck wagon—like the almost unbearable nostalgia of an exile upon mention of his homeland—before the sullen suspicion had lowered the heavy lids over it, hiding it. "On the contrary," she said. "Somehow, I think he will show up."

III

SICK, GREY ground-fog filled the hollows and crossed the higher flats in languid serpents when Gail peered out of the wagon at five the next morning. Already the cows were lowing disconsolately

on their bed ground, and someone was puttering about the chuck wagon. She saw Windy's white head of hair. Slipping into a faded crinoline dress, she took the pins from her hair and started combing it out, looking down at Paul beside her in the bed they had made in the linchpin.

His face looked even weaker in sleep. The relaxation of facial muscles dropped his mouth open, allowing his undershot jaw to recede into the sallow folds of flesh forming his neck. It seemed to epitomize the weakness she had come to see in him so clearly these last years. She found a strange, vagrant thought in her head. How would Pothooks Marrs breathe in his sleep?

It almost made her laugh. What a crazy thing to think. She tossed her taffy hair, sighed deeply, climbed out over the tail gate, and walked through the damp grass to the chuck wagon.

"Thought I'd get a few things ready for you," Windy told her. "Fires lit. Dutch ovens are hot. This ain't going to be no picnic, Miss Gail, trying to cook for them ranahans."

"I'm sure they won't dump me in the river if I burn the steak," she said. "Anyway, it's just till I can hunt up a cook. Did you get someone to cut out a steer for meat?"

"The Caverango Kid is saddling up," said Windy, disgustedly. "He's so eager to graduate off the cavvyard he'd rope a locomotive if you asked him."

"How many times have you told me you started by wrangling horses for the Bib Skillet?" she chided him.

Windy shrugged, making unintelligible noises that moved his Adam's apple up and down in his scrawny neck. Then the voice of Don Vargas floated around the chuck wagon.

"Now why don't you take my advice and use this rawhide reata, Kid. Look how supple she is. So narrow the wind don't affect her at all. You want to be a good roper, don't you? Only the best use rawhide."

"And when twelve hundred pounds of beef hits the other end, the rawhide comes apart like hot molasses," said the Kid.

"Nothing breaks if you dally," said Don Vargas in a hurt tone.

"They wouldn't let me back in Texas if they found me taking turns around my horn."

"Sacramento," exploded Don Vargas. "You Tejanos think the only way to rope is to tie it so hard on your horn a herd of buffalo couldn't pull it off. What happens if the bull bounces back up and goes for you? I've seen more than one tie-hard man gored to death because he couldn't let go his rope quick enough."

The Kid must have been tugging at his latigo, because the words came out in a series of grunts. "Any roper bad enough to let that happen deserves whatever he gets."

"Buey, buey," spat Don Vargas. "Just wait a minute. I'm going out with you right now and prove how much better a rawhide reata is than your stupid sisal clothes line. You don't know what roping is till you've seen a real Mexican vaquero toss a hide string."

"Doesn't the Don ever give up?" said Gail, dumping a whole pound package of triple X into the coffee pot.

Windy emitted a snorting laugh. "He's been telling me how superior those Mexican cactus tree saddles is to our Porter rigs all the way from Austin. Last rain we came through got his tree so wet that cactus wood turned to pulp and his whole saddle just sort of melted out from beneath him while he was sitting right in it. I never saw a man look so—so—" Windy broke off, looking past her, and that Adam's apple began to bob up and down, and she knew what was coming out—"well, eat all my blackstrap, if we ain't got a cook!"

Gail turned to see Pothooks Marrs riding up out of the river bottoms. It was an old whey-bellied mare he rode, but there was a cattle brand on its right hip, and it still tried to pick up its feet like it had cut a pretty thin biscuit in its prime. He had on an old canvas mackinaw with his hands stuffed in his pockets, and a disreputable flat-topped horse thief hat jammed down so low on his head it almost hid his eyes. The bridle reins were tied and slung on the horn, and he didn't even bother taking his hands from his pockets when he dismounted. Gail knew the animal had been a roper then, for it halted sharply as soon as Marrs swung his right leg over the cantle to step off. On the ground, he

turned and unlashed a warbag from behind the battered old Porter saddle, and without a word, walked over to the chuck wagon, and heaved the bag through the pucker in front. Then he came back and faced Gail.

"I was drawing down fifty a month at the Bean Buster's," he said.

"A hundred dollars is a lot for a cook," she said. "But I gave you my word. A couple of the boys will be in with a steer for steaks in a few minutes. I've got the triple X boiling."

THEIR talking had finally roused others in the crew. Solo Sam thrust his long, sleepy face over the lip of his sougan, and when he saw who it was, let out a wild rebel yell that brought the others bouncing out of their blankets and grabbing for guns. They crowded around Marrs, clapping him on the back and laughing like a bunch of schoolboys. He took it all indifferently, shoving them off like a patient dog tolerating a bunch of children, but they would not leave him alone, and at last, Gail saw a flitting smile part his lips, revealing startling white teeth beneath that little mustache. Then, abruptly, all the good-natured raillery ceased. Bob Slaughter had appeared.

He must have been down at the river, sousing his head, for his long yellow hair was streaming down his face. He shoved it back with an impatient palm, striding in that long-legged way through the men toward Marrs. Gail drew in a sharp breath, stepping toward him, but he reached Marrs before she could stop him.

"You got a lot of gall coming out here after yesterday," he told Marrs.

"You take it too personally," said Marrs. "You should know better than to rile a cook. Miss Butler's hired me, Slaughter, and I'll tell you right now, boss or no boss, the same thing will happen again any time you poke your nose in my kitchen. I'll tend to my cooking and you tend to your cows and everybody'll be happy."

Slaughter's grin flattened his lips against his teeth in a cold, mirthless way. "The other cooks had the same ideas, Marrs. That's why I'm not going to bother to take it personally. You'll dig your own grave. I don't think you'll measure up to this crews' standards for a biscuit shooter. They may welcome you like a long lost brother now, but that's because they haven't eaten decent food in a week. Wait till we run into a sandstorm and you get your pie full of gravel. It isn't the same as cooking inside a nice dry room. Wait till it rains too hard for fires and they have to eat jerky and dried apples three or four days straight. You'll wish to hell you were back in Dallas at a tenth the salary you're getting now. I'll give you two weeks, Marrs. And that's stretching wet rawhide."

Before Marrs could answer, a shout caused them to turn westward. The Caverango Kid and Don Vargas were hazing a big steer the color of mulberries away from the fringe of the herd and toward the chuck wagon. The Kid was swinging his sisal rope around his head.

"I told you Tejanos didn't know how to rope," bawled the Mexican. "You'll scare every cow off the bed ground swinging that community loop on top, Kid. Watch a real roper."

"Let's not have any rodeo," Marrs shouted at them. "Just set the steer down here and leave your fancy work for the grandstand."

"*Viva,* cried Don Vargas, and made his bid in an underhanded dab that flirted the light, supple rawhide out toward the steer's forelegs. But the steer veered and put its head into the loop.

"Is that the way they do it in Mexico," jeered Windy.

Crestfallen, Don Vargas spurred his horse in to get slack, but Marrs called to him in an angry voice. "Leave it on his neck. I don't care how you throw him, just get him down. Heel him, Kid, and stretch him out."

With an eager whoop, the Kid raced in at the rear of the bull, tossing for the kicking hind legs. Windy held his nose at this poor show. Any Texan considered it beneath him to team rope a steer. Just as the Caverango Kid made his throw, the steer wheeled sharply. This caused its full weight to hit the end of Don Vargas' rope anew.

There was the squeal of hot rawhide as the dallies slid on the Mexican's flat-topped horn. But even this did not provide enough give. The pop was sharp as a gunshot, and the steer somersaulted with the broken end of the rawhide rope flaying empty air.

"Let him go, Kid," shouted Solo Sam, "you'll—"

But the Kid's loop was already out, catching those heels as they came up from the somersault. He had a short rope and it was tied hard and he was still running in the direction he had turned when he expected Don Vargas' rope to be on the other end. He tried to rein away so the weight wouldn't hit the end of his rope with the horse still broadside. The horse changed leads to wheel, and a thousand pounds of beef hit the end of the rope right there, with the horse completely off-balance. Gail heard the sick sound Windy made as all four feet went from beneath the horse.

WITH a scared shout, the Kid tried to kick free of his stirrups. His left leg was still beneath the horse when it hit, though. With slack in the rope, the dazed bull scrambled free of the loop and lunged to its feet. The frightened, whinneying horse did the same thing. Then Gail saw why the Kid hadn't gotten that other leg free. His heel had broken off and his foot had slipped through the stirrup.

"Get him," she screamed, running toward the horse, "get him somebody, he'll drag—"

This only frightened the horse more, and it spun and bolted in the direction of the wagons. The other men all started going after it, but it was the cook's movement which caught Gail's attention. She did not think she had ever seen a man move so fast. Instead of going directly after the horse, Marrs spun and ran in quick, stabbing little steps to the sougans scattered over the grounds. Most of the men used their own saddles for pillows, and he bent over, without lessening his driving run, to rip a rope off one of the rigs. His run had quartered him away from the animal so that he was now out at one side of it, while the other men were still bunched directly in behind the beast. But it was obvious they could never catch it, and Pata Pala had already veered off to get a horse.

The running animal had almost reached the chuck wagon, dragging the Kid, his head banging from side to side on the ground, his arms flailing—and Gail knew the boy would be killed if the horse ever got past the wagon, with the whole prairie to run in. It was only Marrs, in that last moment, who held the Kid's life in his hands.

He did it casually, with no sense of crisis to the thing. Still running, he flirted the loop out and made the toss in an underhanded swipe that came straight out of the Texas brush.

"Oh, no," sobbed Gail, because the horse was running to go behind the chuck wagon, and by the time that rope reached him, there would be no more than a foot between the hind wheel and the front of the horse, and the loop was too big to go in front of the animal without fouling up on the wheel. Gail stopped running, sinking to one knee in hopeless despair as that swinging loop sped after the horse. Then, though she could not really believe it, she realized that the loop was growing smaller as it flew, the hondo was sliding down the rope even as Marrs paid it out. At the finish, it was no bigger than the top of a Stetson.

It still would have struck the wheel, but in the last instant, Marrs flirted his downpointed hand upward, and the loop stood on end, and went between horse and wagon wheel like a rolling hoop. The horse put his forefeet right into it. Marrs wheeled away with the rope across one hip, and his whole body jerked as the animal went down. Gail still remained on that one knee, dazed, unable to believe it possible. The other men had run up, and Solo Sam sat on the horse's head while Windy disentangled the Kid's foot. Blood covered the boy's face, but Gail got a pail of water from the butt and one of the clean dishrags, washing it away, and saw that the cuts were not bad. He was not completely unconscious, and when he had recovered somewhat from his daze, he just sat there staring up at Marrs, holding his head in his hands.

"I didn't get it all," he muttered. "I only know there wasn't enough room between the wagon and that horse to stick a barlow knife in. I didn't even look for it to come from you. How did you get a rope on him?"

Marrs shrugged. "Never had any more room than that down—"

He caught himself up, and Gail looked at him. "Down where, Pothooks?"

She saw that sullen withdrawal lower

the heavy sensuous lids over his dark eyes till they were barely visible. "Never mind."

"But we will mind," said Slaughter, something mocking to the laughing tone of his voice. "Looks like brush country roping to me. Is that what you mean, Marrs? Down in the brush. What are you doing so far north—"

"I said, never mind," Marrs told him in a sharp, guttural tone.

"Reminds me of the time Pecos Bill lost his horse across the river," chuckled Windy. "It was spring flood and bank full and too dangerous for him to swim, but he was afraid the animal would wander off over there if he didn't stake him. So he tied six ropes together till he had about three hundred and fifty feet of line, and—"

"Put your jaw in a sling, you're liable to step on it," growled Pata Pala.

"If somebody don't get me that steer," said Marrs, "all you'll eat for breakfast is whistle berries and Texas butter, and not much of that."

SOLO SAM got a rope and walked out toward the remuda for his horse. Marrs went around to the fires and began stirring them up. Gail made sure the boy was all right, getting some kerosene and lard from the drawer behind the chuck wagon to put on those cuts and bruises. Sam brought in his pied bronc and slung a kak on and then went out after the blue steer again. While he and Windy were throwing and killing and butchering it, Gail watched Marrs make his bread. She found her eyes on the casual competence of those square, hairy, rope-scarred hands again, as he rolled the dough out for lightbread, shaping it in pans and slipping the pans into a Dutch oven. The lid of the oven had been previously heated, and on the top of it, he put several more shovels full of coal. Windy brought him a hind quarter of the yearling, and Marrs cut many thin steaks about the size of his palm from it. These he rolled in the flour left from the breadmaking, and dropped into another Dutch oven, which already held about three inches of crackling, red-hot lard. When these steaks were finished, Gail got three or four of them, covered with crisp, delicious brown batter, for herself and Paul, and putting tin cups of coffee and pan bread on the tray, carried it to him. He was awake and stirring restlessly.

"It's about time you got here," he said. "What's held you up? This bread is soggy."

"It was too dry yesterday," she told him. "You're getting peevish in the wagon, Paul. You haven't any fever today. Why don't you get out a little bit?"

"And catch my death of cold," he said. "You know I'm not well yet, Gail. Why do you always prod me to get out?" The whites of his eyes had a yellowish tinge in the gloom, sliding up to her. "Maybe you want me to get sick, is that it?"

"Oh, stop it, Paul—"

"You and Slaughter must be having a good time, out riding the herd with him every day, going into town—"

"I had to go into town. We needed a new cook."

"And at Corsicana you needed some flour," he said. "I know, Gail, I know, a sick man doesn't please you very much, does he; a nice, healthy young woman like you needs a hand with some vinegar in his blood—"

"Paul, will you stop it," she said. "It's not that and you know it."

"What is it, then?" He studied her narrowly. "You'd do it if I was well anyway. Is that it?"

"Do what?" she said thinly.

He grimaced at the coffee. "You said a new cook? More like a crazy wagon belly cheater with this sheep dip."

"It's the best coffee you've had in months and you know it."

"How ardent you are in his defense," he murmured. "Perhaps the cook is handsome too."

"Paul, will you stop it, please." She turned away, on the verge of tears. "Why does it have to be like this. All the time. You're getting morbid in here, Paul. Won't you please get out, just a little bit?"

"No, will you stop asking me that, no!" He swept his food off the tray with a vicious motion, dropping heavily back into the blankets. "Take it out. It's foul. Get me something decent to eat."

She remained on her knees, staring dully at him. Then she started gathering it up.

She made no sound, but she could

not stop the tears from gathering in her eyes. She tried to turn her face away before he saw the first one across her cheek. But he must have caught it. She heard him stirring at her side, and tensed for another tirade. Instead, she felt his hand on her arm, turning her around, and she was pulled against him.

"Gail, honey, I'm sorry, forgive me, Gail?" His hands were moulding her shoulder, her neck, caressing her hair tenderly, deftly. "I don't know what makes me like this. It is the confinement, I guess. Forgive me. I'm a fool."

Her face was against his chest, where she had found such comfort before, after their battles. But now she could gain no assurance from his contrition. The hands were too deft, stroking her head. It had happened too many times before.

"Why do we have to be this way, Paul," she said in a choked, tortured whisper. "We never used to quarrel."

"I don't know, Gail," he said. "It's my fault. This sickness. This worrying over the Pickle Bar. Forgive me, honey."

She drew a heavy, resigned breath. "Yes, Paul."

He emitted a small laugh, settling back. "That's better. No reason for us to quarrel. Tell me about the new cook."

"Not much to tell." She started gathering the stuff up once more. "He's rather reserved. He's a good roper."

"Roper?"

"Yes." She looked up, staring blankly at the hoops of the wagon, as it was brought to her mind again. "In fact, Paul, he's probably the best roper I've ever seen. Did you ever see a man throw a hooley ann clear to the end of a rope, Paul?"

He shrugged. "That isn't so rare. Any top hand can do it. I've seen Waco pull it in a corral."

"But not put a mangana in it at the same time," she said. "If Waco can hit a mangana it's got to be a community loop at half that distance, and even then he misses one out of two. But Pothooks was throwing a hooley ann, Paul, the loop wasn't any bigger than the crown of your hat when it hit the end of that rope, and he stood it on end in the neatest mangana you ever saw. That horse stepped right into it."

Paul let out a rueful laugh. "All right, all right, don't get so excited about it. So he's a grandstander."

"No," she said. "It couldn't have been done any other way. He saved the Kid's life." She turned to him, a plate in her hand. "Paul, he isn't a fairgrounder. He isn't the type. He didn't want to do that. I saw it in him, just that instant before he went for the rope, just a moment there, when he had to choose between revealing how good he was with a clothesline or letting the Kid die."

Paul was interested now, frowning at her. "You mean he's that good?"

"I told you, Paul," she said. "I never saw anything like it. A man like that doesn't come along often. Pothooks Marrs. Does the name mean anything to you? Pretty far back, probably. Those rope marks on his hands were old. Ten, fifteen years. Down in the brush country. A short, heavy-set man with eyes like a sulking bull and a little black mustache and very white teeth."

"Pothooks Marrs", Paul said it speculatively, sucking in his lower lip. He shook his head faintly. "No. It doesn't do anything to me. You mean he has a past?"

"All the signs point that way," she said.

He shrugged again. "Well, so what, half the men you run into along the trail have a past. I think Solo Sam is riding from something. Slaughter himself has buried a lot of dirty bones in his time."

"But not like this," she said. "Not so afraid of revealing themselves that they'd take another job. That would be the worst kind of torture for a man with cattle in his blood. Maybe this isn't his real name. Can't you think of someone, Paul. Someone so good at his trade he can't work at it for fear his skill would mark him."

"They don't come that good very often, Gail. You know it. Quite a few men dropped out of sight down San Antonio way during that time. Ten years ago? You know how rough it was. Gardin Barrett was awfully good on the rope. But he was a big lanky man." He halted so sharply she bent toward him. "M," he said. "Marrs." His eyes narrowed. "Lee M. Benton. Could that be it? Nobody ever did know what the M was for." He shook his head abruptly. "No. It couldn't be."

"Who was Lee M. Benton?" she said.

"Never mind. It couldn't be him."

"Who was he?" she insisted.

"I told you never mind," he snarled, in a burst of anger. "You wouldn't want to know."

"Paul." She could not help the ominous little catch in her voice. "Why wouldn't I want to know?"

IV

A THOUSAND three and four-year-olds with the elongated Pickle Bar on their gaunt, dusty rumps strung out up the bottomland of the Trinity toward Denison and Colbert's Ferry and Fort Sill and Dodge. The dust they raised formed a haze that sometimes obscured the sun, and their hoarse bawling formed a constant undertone to the intermittent shout of a drag rider or a pointer. On the tail end, a ghostly, rocking figure in the dust, rode Solo Sam, singing *That Dad Blamed Boss* in his dubious baritone.

I'll get me a new slicker
And some Coffeyville boots
Buy a quart of good red likker,
And quit this old galoot . . ."

At the chuck wagon, Pothooks had dumped the remaining hot water in the wreck pan full of dirty tin plates and cups, and was washing them. For a moment, the sounds of cattle and the dust and that off-key song lifted him out of his brooding, somber mood. He stared out across the dim, bobbing, long-horned heads, and took a deep, careful breath, like a man would take a deep draught of good liquor, savoring it. How long was it since he had been a part of this? He didn't like to recall. It was like a lost space in his life, a vacuum. It was strange how the life remained in a man's blood. He had heard an old sailor try to explain the same thing about the sea once. If it got hold of you, there was no forgetting it, there was no denying the strength of its pull. Only someone who belonged could understand. It was why he had come, when Gail made that offer. He had resisted the pull so long, now, and could not resist it any longer. He had thought he would be safe. The rest was so far behind. And then, the first horse in the corral, that kid had to go and make him throw a rope. He had seen the look on Gail's face. Something was in her mind already. He looked up as the whinney of a high stepping horse heralded the approach of the Kid, herding the cavvyard of spare animals by. He reined his own bronc in, greeting Marrs.

"How's the head?" asked the cook, without smiling.

"Fine, thanks to you," grinned the Kid. His horse pirouetted around, but the boy reined him back to look at Marrs once more, a strange, indefinable expression shining in his eyes. Then he spurred off after the remuda. Guy Bedar came around from the front of the chuck wagon, leading a horse. The earth caked on its fetlocks looked like drying bottom mud.

"If Slaughter's right about you still having to make your peace with the crew, there's your first recruit," said Bedar, leaning against a wheel to roll himself a cigarette. He chuckled throatily. "It's funny about a kid, isn't it? First off, Slaughter was a little tin god. He couldn't do wrong. Caverango was going to be a trail boss and woo every filly from Doan's Crossing north and take Dodge apart with his bare hands at the end of every drive. He was bouncing around too much to get a good look at that job of roping you did, but they've all been feeding him full of it. He was out there this morning trying to put a mangana in a hooley ann."

"He'll get over it," said Marrs heavily.

"You better hope not," said Bedar. "Come a time when you're going to need every friend you got in this outfit. And they don't exactly number in the thousands right now."

Bent over the wreck pan, Marrs looked up abruptly. "What the hell are you hanging around for?"

"Slaughter told me to pilot you over the rough country northward," said Bedar. He took a deep drag on the cigarette, glanced over toward the linchpin. There was no sign of Gail, and he dropped the smoke, grinding it out with a heel. "Someone else also told me something. There's a man down in the brakes that would like to see you."

"He wants to see me he can come up here," said Marrs, piling dishes into the chuck box.

"On the contrary," said Bedar. "You'd better go down there . . . Lee."

MARRS whirled so sharply it jerked a breath from him in a hoarse grunt. The blood had receded from his cheeks, leaving them pale. His nostrils fluttered faintly, like a spooked horse. When he spoke, it was barely audible.

"Bedar!" he said, frowning, searching the man's face.

The man laughed, tossing his head. "Oh, don't go hunting your backtrails for me. I wasn't there. First time I laid eyes on you was this morning. But when I told Rickett about that roping, he knew who it was right away."

"Rickett!"

"Yeah," said Bedar. "Down in the brakes."

Marrs walked around to the front of the wagon, climbing on a wheel to reach behind the seat for his warbag. From this he extracted a big Whitneyville Walker with most of the blueing worn off its long barrel. He thrust it in his belt right behind the buckle. Then he slung the ancient, rawhide-laced kak on his whey-bellied mare and unhitched her from the wagon, walking her back to where Moore stood.

"Let's go," he said doggedly.

The mud along the bottoms had that same waxen gloss to it as the muck in the streets of Dallas. The animals sank to their fetlocks in some places, and every time they stopped, the mud relinquished their hooves with sucking, chortling reluctance. Rickett was waiting in a bunch of scrub oak. It was the same facile mouth, thought Rickett, a little heavier about the jowls, the same eyes, pouched a little deeper by dissipation. Grey was beginning to tinge his temples. He bent forward slightly, to stare at Marrs, a vague wonder filling his eyes.

"I'd expected a little change," he said, in a low voice. "Not this much. I don't think I'd recognize you if I saw you on the street, Lee."

"What do you want?" said Pothooks, sullenly.

"Now don't be like that," said Rickett. "This is Thibodoux, Lee."

"Pothooks," corrected Marrs, doggedly. He needed but one glance to read most of the story in the dark man with queued hair and the slender, pendant hands. "I asked you what you wanted, Rickett."

"I want to tell you about Ellsworth," said Rickett.

"You don't have to," said Marrs. "With the quarantine law extended west of town, it's easy enough to see Ellsworth is through as a cattle terminus. Is that who you're working for now, Rickett? All the boys on South Main. I do imagine it pays more than inspecting brands for the old Refugio Association."

A subtle alteration darkened those guileless blue eyes momentarily. Then Rickett shrugged. "It does at that. A lot of money in gambling, Lee-ah, pardon me, Pothooks. That is if you're on the right side of the table. The interests I represent hate to lose that money. They will if the cattle don't hit Ellsworth this year. I tried to explain it to Slaughter. I tried to show him how a man of his calibre formed a greater example than he realized along the trail. If he busted through to Ellsworth, the others would follow. On the other hand, Dodge City isn't established yet, and if he turned off on a new route in that direction, and a whole string of appalling accidents happened, preventing him from getting through, it would cause a lot of them to go to Ellsworth anyway. He's turning off toward Dodge at the Red. Those accidents are going to start happening right soon. You're going to cause a lot of them. You always were good at the head of a herd,

Pothooks. The Washita's flooding hell over her banks. She's ripe for you to help Bedar get that herd of Pickle Bar's in a mill and drown as many as you can. Maybe that'll make Slaughter believe we mean what we say. If it don't, we have a lot more cards up our sleeve."

"You just dropped this one out," said Marrs. "I told you it was no go."

"Did it ever strike you," said Rickett blandly, "how many men would like to see you dead?"

There was no sound for a moment after that. They stared at each other without speaking. A horse snorted dismally. Finally Rickett laughed harshly.

"I guess you know that about as well as anyone," he said. "I guess it's why you stayed so low after you got out of jail. They didn't think they were dealing with such a dangerous man when they chose you, did they? They thought you were just a simple little maverick to hand a bell on."

Marrs made a spasmodic, impatient move to one side, as if to wheel his horse, but Rickett held up his hand. "That's just what I mean, Pothooks. Were you planning on leaving the Pickle Bar now? How useless it would be to try and skip again. All I'd have to do is drop the word that I'd seen Lee Marrs Benton. You couldn't change your appearance so radically again. Age did most of it for you. And there's hardly a place you could run that they wouldn't be.

"Boa Snyder and Curt Young are up in Montana now. Boa has the biggest outfit in the Territory, runs a crew of a hundred men. If he heard you were back, and what you looked like, and what you were doing, you couldn't put your foot north of the Platte without him finding you. The Melbourne brothers are big shippers in Frisco, too. And Dee Nation sits a fancy saddle in Webb County politics—a sheriff and a dozen town marshals to work for him, even a few Rangers to put on your track if he really tried hard."

MARRS stared at him another long space, the smoldering fire in his eyes growing brighter and brighter, and then, with a vicious jerk, he necked the mare in a wheeling turn. Rickett took one step forward, grabbing her bit before she could get all the way around.

"Hold up, Pothooks," he said. "I want your word on it. You're staying with the Pickle Bar. You know how useless it would be to run. And you're doing what I ask, all along."

"I am not!" It left Marrs in an explosive shout. He let Rickett's pull on the bit spin the mare back, and leaned out of the saddle toward the man, saying it in a guttural, shaken way. "I didn't come back looking for any blood, Rickett. I'm not bitter and I don't want revenge. I just want to be left alone. And by God, if you don't leave me alone, I'll kill you."

"He said he'd kill me, Thibodoux," said Rickett.

"*C'est extraordinaire,*" murmured the Creole.

"Let go, Rickett!" shouted Marrs.

"Don't get so high-handed," said Rickett, yanking the rearing mare back down. "You're in no position—"

"I said let me go," roared Marrs, once more, necking the mare this time so hard that she spun in against Rickett, and booting her in the kidneys at the same time. She bolted forward, jerking Rickett off-balance, and bringing him within range of Marrs' boot as he jerked his foot from the stirrup and lashed out at Rickett. It caught Rickett in the shoulder, tearing his grip off the bit, and the forward plunge of the horse spun him around on its barrel, back against Marrs' leg. Marrs kicked him away.

"Get him," shouted Rickett, trying to keep from falling into the mud.

With the mare still bolting forward, Marrs saw what Thibodoux meant to do, and knew he was in no position to meet it with his own gun. He laid the reins on the right side of the mare's neck with a vicious jerk, and the horse veered sharply to the left, right at Thibodoux. The Creole had to forget about his gun and take a dive aside to keep from being struck by the charging beast.

Guy Bedar's cowpony must have had a takeoff like a jackrabbit, because it lunged into Marrs' vision on his right side, head lifted high with the pain of the rider's big Petneckey spurs raking its flanks. It caught the mare a few feet beyond where Thibodaux had left it, and Bedar threw himself bodily off his horse at Marrs.

The man's weight carried Marrs off his

mare, and they fell heavily into the mud. Marrs struck first, with Bedar's weight coming fully upon him to knock the breath out.

Still, he managed to hook an arm about the man's neck and roll over on top. Then all that latent, smoldering violence fulfilled itself in the savage fist Marrs smashed in the man's face. Bedar made a sick sound, and went limp.

Marrs started getting onto his feet, but he was faced in such a direction that he caught a dim, blurred glimpse of Thibodaux rising from where he had dived into the mud, and of the man's intent. Knees still bent, Marrs whirled toward the Creole, yanking at the Walker Colt in his belt at the same time.

"Thibodaux," shouted Rickett, "Hold it," and Marrs stopped his own draw with the tip of the Colt's barrel still through his belt. What would have happened if he had pulled it on out was a certainty. Both men had started diving for iron at the same moment, but Thibodaux's gun had cleared its holster before Marrs even touched the handle of his Walker. Marrs would have finished the draw anyway, if Rickett hadn't shouted. But the chance that Thibodaux would obey Rickett was better than bucking certain death by going through with his draw.

Carefully, Marrs straightened up, shoving the Colt slowly back into his belt. Thibodaux stood holding his gun on Marrs with no expression in his sloe eyes. Rickett got up out of the mud, taking a futile swipe at the muck on his pants.

"Just had them cleaned, too, damn you," he said, mildly. Then he looked up, as if seeing the scene in its entirety for the first time. "How do you like my boy? Did you ever see anybody so fast with a smoke pole?"

He paused, as if expecting an answer. When Marrs made no sound, Rickett spoke to the Creole without looking in his direction. "You can put it away now, Thibodaux. I don't think the man is going to antagonize us any more. I think he knows what a tight chute he's in. I think he'll go back to the Pickle Bar and stay right there, in a prime position to do whatever we want, whenever we want. Don't you, Thibodaux?"

"Whatever we want," said Thibodaux.

NORTHWARD, clouds formed tiers on the horizon, darkening with the threat of rain, as somber as the mood that filled Pothooks Marrs as he made his way back to the chuckwagon. A few hundred feet from where he had left Rickett and the others, something caught his eye. It was a bit of red cloth caught on a bush, and beneath it, the mud was trampled as if a horse had stood there for some time. Bending to scan the ground, he saw footprints leading away from the bush back in the direction from which he had come. It was all fresh sign, and could not logically come from any of the men he had seen. He picked the red patch off the bush, feeling its texture. Woolen. He stuffed it absently into a pocket and rode on.

In his mind, mostly, were Rickett's words. *There's hardly a place you could run that they wouldn't be.* For a moment, the certainty of that filled him with a tenuous, insidious fear. How well Rickett had read him. He *had* meant to skip the Pickle Bar, to get out, to run. The impulse of it had leaped into his mind the first time Bedar had mentioned Rickett's name, there at the chuck wagon. But now, Rickett's words only underlined the futility of that. Marrs shook his head in a dogged way, eyes squinted with the terrible frustrated feeling twisting him up inside. He just couldn't see himself drowning those Pickle Bar cows. Yet, if he didn't, Rickett could drop that word, and the world would not be big enough to hide Pothooks Marrs.

Still filled with the bitter confusion, he hitched his mare behind the chuck wagon. He saw that the linchpin had already left. He had come up on the blind side of his own outfit, and only when he started around the other side toward the front did he see the immense, kettle-gutted man standing by a hairy black cutting horse. Marrs stopped like a snubbed bronc, sick with the shock of it. Kettle Corey turned toward him, wiping perspiration off his beefy face with a soggy, grimy bandanna. His little blue eyes were totally incongruous with the gross carnality of the rest of him. Like icy blue pools, almost hidden by the veined, pouches of his eyelids, they held the chill lucidity of the patient, keen, incisive mind in that monstrous, ugly head. It was what Marrs had remembered most.

"You must be the new cook," said Ket-

tle. "I got blotto in Dallas. Woke up in that alley behind the Oxbow about an hour ago. Slaughter will have my hide for it, I guess." He chuckled ruefully, shrugging. "How about a cup of triple X before I catch up with the herd?" All the time, he had been scrutinizing Marrs closely with those little eyes. "What's your name, coosie?"

"They call me Pothooks," said Marrs.

The fat man's chuckle shook his wattles. "Good name for a cook." A deep furrow dug into the flesh between his eyes, and he bent toward Marrs. "Did you ever spoil the grub for the Double Bit outfit?"

What are you doing, damn you, thought Marrs, *cat and mouse?* "Never got up to the Panhandle," he said, dipping a tin cup into the kettle of coffee.

"I don't know," said Kettle, studying him. "You look familiar."

Handing the cup to the man, it struck Marrs for the first time that Kettle was allowing the top of his long underwear to suffice for a shirt. Out of the red wool, just about his belt, on one side, a patch about the size of a man's thumb had been torn. Marrs' neck pulled into his shoulders slightly, and he started hitching up the horses.

"A quiet man," observed Kettle, finishing the coffee. "I like quiet men." He set the cup down, turning to hoist himself aboard his hairy animal. The rig creaked so loudly Marrs thought it would come apart, and Kettle almost pulled the whole saddle around beneath the horse before he finally got his weight settled. He looked down at the cook, a strange, sad expression in his sweating face. "Did it ever strike you," he said, "as short as a man's life really is, how long it can be, sometimes?" He reined his horse away to leave. "Sometimes too long."

Marrs watched him trot off into the lowlands, then kick the animal into a heavy canter. It was unbelievable that Kettle had failed to recognize him. He kicked out the fire, closed the tailgate, which formed the chuckbox lid, and climbed into the seat. Guy Bedar came walking his horse up out of the bottoms, and about thirty feet away, jerked his head northward, indicating he would scout out a decent trail for the wagon to follow. The first big drops of rain started plunking into the canvas top of the wagon as Marrs shook the reins out. He reached for his mackinaw and hat and hunched down to ride the wet spell out.

THEY rounded the herd and picked a spot in some blackjack timber for lunch. It took Marrs fifteen minutes to find dry wood, finally digging out some dead cottonwood down by a wash. He tried to set up tarps for flies to cover the fires, but a wind had come up, and whipped the rain in under these anyway. Wet through to the skin, slopping around in the mud, fighting wind and rain, he was in an unspeakable mood when the riders started to come in. They were pushing the herd on by and arriving for lunch two and three at a time. He could not keep enough fires going to keep the coffee warm and cook the meat and bread too. A horse got loose and kicked the lid off a dutch oven, and by the time Slaughter and Solo Sam came in, they had soggy, fallen bread, and cold coffee and burned steaks.

"What the hell," growled Sam, "we don't ask it to taste like cream puffs, but you could at least have it hot."

"You want it hot, you build me the fires," growled Marrs.

Slaughter swallowed his cold coffee without saying a word, but there was a faint, wise smirk on his face that Marrs had a great desire to wipe off with a dishpan. When Gail came back with the tray from their wagon, it looked as if she had been crying. She set it down, and left hurriedly, and he saw that little of the food had been eaten. It began to thunder, and all hands had to hurry back to the herd to keep it traveling quietly. It was probably the only thing that prevented a clash between Marrs and the grumbling men.

There was a green rawhide stretched beneath the chuck wagon they called the possum belly, and into this, Marrs dumped as much of the dry cottonwood as it would carry. Then he packed up and started another wet drive. The rain had increased by now and the first big creek they reached was flooded. Dripping wet, cursing as only a disgruntled cook could curse, Marrs had to stop and cut down a couple of young trees, lashing them to either side of the wagon. Bedar was not with him now, for

they needed every hand on the herd, and alone, he started to ford the stream down a dugway hollowed out by the cattle.

When it became too deep to roll, the logs lashed on the sides of the bed floated the wagon. He made it to the far bank all right but the current swept the stern end of the wagon into the bank, smashing up the off-wheel. He could not repair it, and in the driving rain, had to lash one of those slim logs slantwise along the bed to form a drag. This slowed him down to a snail's pace, and it was already dark by the time he reached the bed ground. The cattle were shifting mournfully in the rain, and the dull glint of a yellow slicker guided Marrs to the camp spot. A lantern burning within the covering of the linchpin gave it a sick, saffron glow in the dark. The men stood in a group beneath the blackjack timber, huddled into their slickers. There was something in their shifting, nervous silence that bothered him as he climbed off the wagon.

"What made you so damn late?" said Pata Pala.

"It was running so easy on all four wheels I took the right rear off to make it feel more like home," said Marrs, sarcastically. "I'm sure obliged to all of you for stirring me up a fire, too."

"Don't get oily," said Slaughter. "Hurry up and throw that boggy top together."

"Boggy top?" Marrs dragged some of the cottonwood from the possum belly, saw that it was saturated. "There ain't going to be no pie tonight. You'll be lucky if you get anything, the way this wood is."

"No boggy top," said Windy. "Why, that reminds me of the time Pecos Bill was out on roundup and the cook didn't have no pie for him. Pecos was so mad he took his clothes line and—"

"Shut up and start hunting for some dry squaw wood," growled Marrs, moving over to a bank where he began kicking the earth down in search for some buried buffalo chips.

"Sure," said the Caverango Kid, "the least we can do is help him."

"You tend to your remuda," Slaughter told him.

"But—"

"Kid," said Slaughter, "if you dont' get out there and ride herd on that cavvyard till we get supper, I'll put you to holding cows all night long without your slicker."

The boy left reluctantly, glancing in a strange way at Marrs. The cook could see them all watching him, now, and sensed the rising issue. None of them made a move to aid as he finally located some dry buffalo chips and carried them over in his hat, digging out a hole beneath the bed of the wagon. He had to rip off the possum belly and throw the wood out to give him height enough for the fire.

Soaked to the skin, hands muddy and slippery, he was thoroughly maddened by the time he got the fire lit. He piled the cottonwood about the feeble blaze in an effort to dry it. He found that the butchered yearling had come off its gaunch hooks within the wagon and the quarters and ribs were half-buried in the mud and debris he had collected fording the river. He tried to clean them off, but the muck was so impregnated in the meat he had to give this up. It was hog side, then, and the hell with them.

"Oh, no," said Waco Garrett, when he saw it. "I ate so much of that chuck wagon chicken with the last belly cheater I started grunting in my sleep and was afraid of looking around behind me for fear I'd sprouted a curly tail."

"And hot rocks, too," growled Guy Bedar when Marrs got out the biscuit makings. "That sure don't sound like boggy top to me."

Marrs wheeled from the chuck box. "Listen," he told them. "One more word and I'm going to cut my wolf loose. You're getting hogside and sinkers tonight and forgetting the rest till next sunshine. Now shut up and man at the pot." Nobody made a move. "Man at the pot!" roared Marrs, "or I'll throw it in your face."

Kettle Cory moved out of the shadows. Slaughter's face turned toward him. Those lucid blue eyes gleamed like a cat's in the dark, meeting Slaughter's gaze. Then they swung to Marrs, filled with a strange expression, and Kettle came on out and got a handful of tin cups and began to dip the coffee out of the pot beneath the chuck wagon, handing out the full cups.

They did not seem as hurried to take them as a crew that hungry should. Marrs knew what was happening, now. He wondered if it had come as a tacit agreement among them to choose this time for a test,

or whether someone had instigated it. He did not believe Slaughter would approach them directly. As irritable and miserable as they were, it was a simple thing to shape their attitude with a few incidents.

TURNING back to the chuck box, Marrs saw that wind had blown the canvas fly away, and the biscuits were full of water. With a bitter curse, he tossed them into a Dutch oven anyway. He had to move the coffee pot off the only fire in order to cook the bread. When the biscuits and sowbelly were done, Marrs rattled plates and forks down onto the shelf of the chuck box, stepping aside for them to get the utensils.

His glance dared anyone to say something out of line. Pata Pala was the first. After Marrs loaded his plate with sinkers and meat, the peglegged man dipped himself out another cup of coffee. He stood back, and Marrs noticed he did not start eating until the others had been served. Then Pata Pala took a swig of the coffee, his muddy, swarthy face twisting into a grimace.

"Cold coffee, soggy bread, and hog side fit for a sheepherder," he said, and dumped it on the ground. "I ain't eating this."

"I ain't either," added Waco Garrett, upturning his plate. "After a day like this a man deserves better. Boggy top and yearling steaks or nothing."

The others dumped their food into the mud, and Marrs stared at his bread and sowbelly slowly melting into chocolate ooze. "Pick up them plates and put 'em in the wreck pan," he said. "If that's the way you want it, you'll go without supper."

Pata Pala hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his levis and leaned back, spitting at his tin plate. "We ain't doing anything till you cook us some decent grub."

"You want some more grub, you cook it yourself," said Marrs.

"We dumped the other cook in the river for less than that," said Pata Pala.

"You ain't dumping this one in," Marrs told him.

"We are if you don't throw together some more chuck."

"The hell you are," said Marrs. He saw Solo Sam moving to get around behind him, and he whirled to grab for that sawed off machete. Pata Pala launched himself in a dive at Marrs' legs, striking him at the knees. It carried Marrs back into the mud. Marrs hooked an arm about Pata Pala's neck, holding the man onto him and slugging him in the face. Then the arm was torn aside by someone else. He saw Don Vargas grabbing for his other arm, and writhed aside, lashing out with a leg at the Mexican. It caught Don Vargas in the knee, and he bent over with a howl.

"Let him go, let him go," shouted the Caverango Kid, running in to hook his hands in Pata Pala's broad black belt, trying to heave him off Marrs.

"Stay out of this, Kid," shouted Waco Garrett, tearing the boy's hands free and throwing him down in the mud. Then he wheeled back and lifted a boot. Marrs saw his intent and tried to get that free hand out of the way. But the spike heel caught it, pinning the hand down into the mud. Don Vargas had recovered now, and he caught the wrist while Waco held it down. Then Windy and Waco each caught a foot.

Overpowered, struggling, writhing, cursing fiendishly, Marrs was carried and dragged through the muddy grass down a dugway onto the flooded river bottoms. Here they held him while Solo Sam grabbed his hair and shoved his head underwater.

"Now," shouted Pata Pala, "are you going to cook us a decent meal?"

"The hell with you," sputtered Marrs, and jacknifed his right leg to straighten it out viciously in Windy's belly. The old man wheezed and doubled over, releasing the foot. This gave Marrs purchase against the ground, and he rolled over in their grasp, fighting like a wild animal. Sam caught his hair and shoved his head under again. Marrs was still breathing and sucked in a great lungful of water. This only made his struggles more frenzied. He felt an arm tear free and lashed out across his body at Pata Pala. He kept jacknifing the other leg, and his head jerked out of the river in time to hear Waco shouting.

". . . he's crazy, Pata, I can't hold him . . ."

"I'll hold him," said the peglegged man, and released his arm to hit him full in the face. It knocked Marrs' head back into

the water. Stunned for that moment, he felt them grabbing at him again. Sam pulled his head out again.

"How about that grub?" shouted Pata Pala.

"The hell," gasped Marrs, struggling weakly.

They shoved him under again. He thought his whole being would explode with the awesome frustration of blocked breath and feeble helplessness. He seemed to float away from his own struggles for a moment, feeling them in a detached, dreamy way. Then, with a shocking jolt, he was back within their orbit, gasping, choking, sucking in a great breath that choked him.

"How about that grub?"

"No, damn you, no!"

Was that him? Feeble, like that? Hardly audible. In a sudden new burst of agony, his body writhed and jerked, and then it was the water again, filling his throat, his lungs, his consciousness. Hands in his hair shoving him under. Hands on his arms and legs holding their wild lashing. Hands in his hair jerking him up again.

"How about it—"

The deafening explosion blotted out Solo Sam's voice. For a moment longer, they held Marrs like that. Then he found himself released, dropped bodily into the water. Choking, gasping, he floundered to his hands and knees, crawling weakly out onto the bank. He was sick there. Finally some focus returned to his vision. He saw the men standing in a bunch where they had dropped him, staring foolishly, almost fearfully at something on the bank. His shaggy, dripping head turned that way. Gail Butler stood in the muddy dugway with a smoking, double-barrelled Greener in her hands.

"Now," she said, "if you don't leave him alone, the next thing I squeeze out of this scattergun will be pointed at something a lot more painful than the air."

V

THE RUSHING SOUND of water seemed to be the only thing in Gail Butler's consciousness. The stupor of sleep lay across her in heavy, oppressive layers. She seemed to grope through them one by one, until full awareness of where she was came to her. Marrs was in her mind, somehow. Had that been last night? She heard Paul draw in a heavy breath beside her, and looked toward him reluctantly. He must have just awakened, and felt her eyes on him.

"Gail," he murmured. "Get me some paregoric."

She felt of his head. "Paul, you haven't got any fever."

"I feel bad," he said. "Get me some, I said."

"Paul, I'm afraid to have you use too much. If you keep it up like this there won't be any left for Waco."

"The hell with Waco," he said, thrashing about in his blankets. "Get me some paregoric, Gail, or do I have to go out and get it myself? I never saw such a woman. Don't give a damn about her own husband. So it's Waco now."

"What's Waco, what do you mean? I just—"

"You just got tired of Slaughter, so now you're playing around with Waco Garrett. Maybe it brings out the maternal instinct in you—a man with his insides so banged up he can't think straight. Pathetic, isn't it? Much more pathetic than your own husband—"

"Oh, Paul, stop it, for God's sake."

She wheeled and fumbled into her robe, crawling from the wagon blindly, unable to see through the tears. She stood against the tail gate, breathing heavily. How could two people start out with so much beauty and end up with so much bitterness.

She remembered the laughter, the kisses, the dancing. How handsome he had been then, how charming. Could a man actually change that radically? Once more she found herself going back over the pattern of it. When Paul had inherited the Pickle Bar, it had been the biggest outfit south of San Antonio. Then, four years after their marriage, came that awful winter of '71. It had ruined a lot of spreads. It didn't leave much of the Pickle Bar.

It had been the first blow, and after that, the pattern formed itself clearly. Each succeeding blow seemed to have wiped off a little of the veneer. She hadn't wanted to believe it, in him, at first. Had refused to face it. The romance of it was too precious to a girl on this barren frontier. But now all the romance was gone,

leaving something sordid ugly. She found it difficult even to retain bitterness, now. It was only dull, aching, with her constantly.

She found herself headed toward the chuck wagon, with the rattling of pans coming dimly from its rear end. The rain had stopped, but the sun had not yet risen. A thick, sticky ground fog sucked at the wheel hubs. And under all the other sounds was the rush of the Red River. She found Marrs building his fires from more of those buried buffalo chips, and asked him for the medicine. He turned without meeting her eyes, moving with those short, stabbing steps to the wagon.

"Did it humiliate you that bad to have a woman stop them, last night?" she said, taking the bottle from his hand.

He met her eyes for the first time. That sullen reserve started to narrow the heavy sensuous lids.

"Don't be childish," she said. "If a man had stopped them, you wouldn't take this attitude with him. What's the difference? You shouldn't feel humiliated. It's happened to other cooks. You can't fight the whole crew."

He scuffed his boot across the ground, staring down at it, then emitted a short, harsh laugh, shrugging. "I guess you're right. I didn't thank you last night, Miss Butler."

"Forgot it," she said. Then she frowned, shaking the bottle. "There isn't much paregoric left, is there?"

"I guess not," he told her.

She handed it back to Marrs. "You keep it for Waco. It's the only thing that will help his old injuries, and we don't run into a town where we can get another bottle till Kansas."

"Won't it cause a row?" he asked. She stared at him, unable, for a moment, to fathom his meaning. "Your husband," he said. She drew a quick little breath, and he made an apologetic motion with one hand. "I don't mean to get personal, but being this near the linchpin, I can't help hearing some of it." He paused, studying something, a faint, humorless smile catching at one corner of his mouth. "You know, it's funny how a man can get to know someone without ever seeing him. I've heard the crew talk about Paul Butler. I've never seen you come out of that linchpin smiling. I've heard him yell at you things I wouldn't say to my dog. You deserve something better than that, Miss Butler."

She drew herself up. "And maybe we'll put the linchpin a little farther away next time we stop," she said coldly. She saw the surprised, hurt look cross his face, and then the withdrawal, as palpable as if he had backed away, retiring into that surly, brooding shell, lowering his head till she could not see his eyes, and turning away from her. She reached out to grasp his arm. "Pothooks, I'm sorry—"

"Forget it," he said. "I got breakfast to make."

t HE pulled away, walking reluctantly t back to the linchpin. She started to climb in. Then, unable to face the tantrum she knew would come when she told Paul there was none to be had, she stepped back and walked around the wagon, moving aimlessly toward the fringe of trees. She rounded an island of soggy oak, and brought up in a startled way. But it was only Windy, digging up more buffalo chips to put in a rawhide bucket.

"Did Pothooks ask you to do this?" she frowned.

Windy cackled. "Ast me? He ordered me, with that machete meat cleaver over my head. That dunking last night didn't take any of his vinegar out."

She studied him a long, silent period,

and finally asked what had been on her mind from the beginning. "Windy, who was Lee Marrs Benton?"

The hoar frost of the old man's eyebrows lifted sharply. He straightened slowly, putting a hand against his back. The expression filling his eyes was almost frightening.

"You know," she said.

"Think I didn't figger it out, the minute he dabbed that hooley ann to the Kid's horse," said Windy. "Not many people knew what that M stood for. But when a man stands as high in his profession as Lee M. Benton did, his skill marks him better'n any name ever would.

"What's the story, Windy?" she said.

He went back to picking at the chips, unwilling to look at her as he spoke. "You remember how mavericking was regarded right after the War between the states. Texas men had been away from their cattle a long time. Five years of increase was running around unbranded. It's easy enough to tell what brand a suckling calf should bear by the mamma it's tailing, but when you get a five year old bull that's been popping the brush so long his horns are mossy, it's almost impossible to tell who he belongs to. There were so many of these mavericks that it became the custom, for a time, to throw your own brand on anything that had no obvious connection with a known outfit. A lot of big cattlemen got their start that way. I worked with Boa Snyder when he started his first outfit purely on the mavericks he'd branded."

"That was just about the time I came from Missouri to marry Paul," said Gail. "I remember. Texas was cattle rich. The big outfits had more cows than they could herd, and no markets for them. They probably encouraged men like Boa to maverick."

"At first they did," said Windy. "But when the northern markets opened up, and a cow became worth fifteen-twenty dollars, mavericking was outlawed. A lot of men like Boa pulled out just in time to save themselves getting the stamp of rustler.

"In fact there's some suspicion that Boa and Curt Young and a few others kept on mavericking undercover a long time after it was outlawed. You probably arrived just after the Benton case.

"A regular war was declared on rustlers and mavericking. A brand inspector for the Refugio Cattle Association was down in Nueces County on a hot trail which he claimed was going to blow the lid off the whole thing. He was found near Corpus Christi. He'd been tied to a mesquite tree and tortured to death. Spanish dagger thorns were in his eyes and his feet was near roasted off in sotol stalks."

Gail could not help the horrified sound she made, and Windy looked up, nodding. "That's the way most folks felt. It sent a reg'lar army of association men and local officers into the brush to clean out them mavericking once and for all. Lee Benton was known to be a leader of one group. He'd started mavericking with Boa and Curt and the others, but he didn't have sense to quit before it became outlawed. One of the Refugio Association men was Gary Carson, an old saddlemate of Benton's, known and loved by everybody along the border. He and three detectives surrounded Benton in a shack south of Corpus Christi.

"The others wanted to fill the shack with lead, but Carson argued them into talking it over with Benton. He went out holding a white handkerchief on a stick, told Benton the situation, that he was surrounded with no hope of escaping, and that he'd save his life by coming out. Benton refused, and when Carson turned around, Benton shot him in the back."

She felt sick, deep down, and stared in horror at Windy. "Why haven't you told me this before?"

"I figured you knew," he said. He went on kicking aimlessly at the buffalo chips. "It was the most useless, wanton killing I ever heard of, I guess, and the brutality of it immediately hooked Benton up with that other tortured man. The detectives filled the shack with lead, thought they'd killed Benton. But he lived to see trial. Feeling was so high that people forgot about the other mavericking down there. For six months, the only talk below the Nueces was Lee Marrs Benton.

"They tried to lynch him a couple of times. The mystery of the whole thing is why Benton didn't get executed. The first judge passed that sentence on him. Then, there came along a decision from the State Supreme Court commuting it to life im-

prisonment. I guess he got out on good behavior or something.

"Do the other men here know?"

HE SHRUGGED. "Some might have guessed. Kettle Corey is the only one who knew Benton personally. He was one of the detectives who trapped Benton in that shack. If he's recognized Pothooks as Lee Marrs Benton, he hasn't given any sign. I don't know what he's doing."

"But you didn't speak," she said. "That's what I can't understand. Suspecting Pothooks of being that man—"

"I thought of quitting. Oncet I felt sick, thinking of whose food I was eating." He lifted his head, staring at her. "But there's sort of a code among punchers, Miss Gail. It leaves a man's past be. There's a lot of men in Texas with ugly things behind them. I made a dry camp with King Fisher oncet, and didn't ast him why he'd murdered ten men, not counting Mexicans. If I had, it would probably have been seventeen."

"That's why you're tolerating this man," she said scornfully. "Not for any code. You're afraid of him, you're afraid to speak out against him!"

An indefinable, hurt expression lined Windy's face, and he lowered his head, nodding. "Maybe you're right. A lot of salt has spilled out of a man when he reaches my age."

"I won't have a man like that working for the Pickle Bar!" said Gail. She whirled and started back to the wagons, aware for the first time that the men were saddling up, the plates still piled untouched on the chuckbox lid. Don Vargas was trying to cinch up his prancing, pirouetting black horse.

"Hold still there, you *chingado*, you *rumbero*, you *poridiosero*—"

"If you'd stop using that baby talk on him and try some real cuss words he might mind," said Pata Pala, disgustedly, swinging onto his hairy cutting horse and jamming that pegleg through the shortened stirrup.

"Baby talk!" exploded Don Vargas. "You don't know what profanity is till you've heard a real Mexican vaquero swear. *Sinverguenza!* What can match that in English?"

"It don't curl my ears," said Pata Pala. Gail ran up to them, asking what had happened, and the peglegged man nodded toward Slaughter, already out getting the herd off the bedground. "Bob says the river's getting higher every minute, and wants to put the cattle over before it gets too rough. Didn't even let us wait for breakfast."

Hurriedly, she turned back toward the wagons. Marrs was forgotten in the excitement. He had already kicked out the fires and hitched up his team, and she watched him drive toward the bank with a mingled intensity of emotions. Finally, she turned to hitch up her own horses and mount the linchpin's seat. Paul crawled out, a blanket over his shoulders.

"What's going on," he said bitterly. "Where's that paregoric?"

"We'll have to get it later, Paul," she evaded. "Why don't you stay out and watch them put the cattle across. It always thrills me so."

"Oh, hell," he said, spitting aside. But he sat down on the seat, staring woodenly ahead, a resentment twitching his face at each jolt of the wagon.

The river swept bankfull before them, chuckling and gurgling at the mouths of the dugways, the great chocolate expanses of muddy water ripped asunder suddenly by a smashed tree, vomited from beneath, to ride a hundred feet on a streak of foaming white water, then sucked down again in a whirlpool formed by a hole dug in the bottom by the rampage. The cattle approached the dugways reluctantly, bawling and lowing.

A steer the color of a sandhill crane balked at the mouth of the dugway; and behind him a beef of blended gold and brown and black which the Mexicans called *hosco golondrino* dug its sharp hooves into the mud and refused to push the steer. They piled up like a backwash behind it. Their great long horns crashed and rang against one another with the sound of a thousand fencers. The raucous bedlam of their bawling rose above the roar of the turbulent river.

Then it was the swing men, pushing in from either side to force that grulla steer out into the water, and make the *hosco golondrino* follow, awkwardly, long bony legs sprawling out like a fallen child, thrusting its heavy, ludicrous head forward

with eyes rolling white. Slaughter was right in the middle. No denying that. The first man in the water, swimming his big roping mare right alongside the *hosco golondrino,* leading them on with his voice as much as his actions. It was a scene that could not help thrill Gail, and she lost herself in watching it.

"Oh, I'll shake this job tomorrow
Pack my soogans on a hoss,
And pull my freight for Texas,
Where there ain't no dad-blamed boss—"

IT WAS Solo Sam on the swing, his lean figure swaying in the saddle as he came in from the side to force the bulk of the herd into the dugway and out into the water. After him, from the other flank, came Guy Bedar. After another space of plunging bawling animals filling the dugway, Kettle Cory's great head appeared above the cattle. His shaggy chopping horse stepped down through that slippery mud so daintily it was hard to believe he was packing close to three hundred pounds on his back. But a heavy man could ride as light as a little one if he was good, and Gail had never seen a horse in Kettle's string nigger-branded.

Then came Don Vargas on the prancing, nervous black. The cattle were spreading out in deeper water now, pushed by the oncoming ranks behind. Slaughter was near the middle, and Gail could barely hear his voice, calling orders to the men. Once, Gail thought she saw Guy Bedar's narrow head turn back toward the chuck wagon, where it had halted on the bank a few yards below the linchpin. It directed her gaze that way. Marrs was busy lashing logs onto the sides of his wagon, oblivious to the scene. Beside Gail, Paul shifted morosely in his blanket, huddled over on the seat, watching the stirring pageant indifferently.

"Slaughter had better send enough men back to get this wagon over safely," he muttered petulantly.

Gail sighed. "I'm sure he will, Paul."

"Hey, Bedar," bawled Windy, from the bank. "You're pushing that *golondrino* away from its trail mate. Get them separated and you'll have a mill, sure."

There was a sharp note to his cry that stiffened Gail on the seat. She had traveled north with enough herds to know the habit of steers choosing a trail mate and traveling a thousand miles without leaving its side. More than once, she had seen a steer bunch-quit to hunt for its mate, refusing to return to the herd until they had found each other again. Evidently the *golondrino* steer had been traveling with the slate-colored leader. She recognized the tone of its call now, the toss of its head. Somehow, Bedar had shoved a cut of steers between this one and the leader, and the *golondrino* had halted completely, swirled around and around by the tide, bawling helplessly for its mate. The grulla leader looked around, and seeing its mate gone, turned to swim back to the *golondrino.*

"Stop that leader," howled Slaughter. "He'll turn the whole herd in a circle."

Bedar left the *golondrino* to swim his horse through the outer fringe toward the leader, and Kettle came in the other way. It looked as if Kettle would reach its flank and turn the beast, but some clumsy maneuver of Bedar turned another cut of steers between Kettle and the slate colored one.

"Get out of there, damn you," bellowed Slaughter.

"What the hell," shouted Bedar, "I can't help what those critters get in their mind."

He wheeled his horse to swim it out of the growing jam, barely escaping the circular motion of animals which the turning back of the leader had started. The positions of the two steers were reversed, now. The whole bunch was beginning to turn like a great wheel, with the leader actually fighting in toward the center, thinking its mate was still there. Actually, the *golondrino* had been swept to the outer fringes by the circling pressure. The bawling of the steers had become so loud and excited now that the shouts of the men farther out were no longer audible.

More and more animals were pouring down out of the dugways, into the river, excited by the noise and violence, and Windy and the other men on the bank could not hold them. The circling mass of steers in the water was growing larger and larger, packed in tighter and tighter.

Evidently thinking that if he could get the *golondrino* separated from the rest, the leader would see its mate and break for it and stop the mill, Slaughter had waited till the spinning fringe carried the *golondrino* around past him, and had roped the ani-

mal's horns. But the *golondrino* started battling. Dirty yellow water gouted up about them, hiding man and beast for an instant. Slaughter's head appeared out of the whirl, then the animal's horns. It was pulling him on back into the other steers. Gail found herself standing on the seat, screaming at Slaughter.

"Don't fight them that way, Bob, you'll only spook the whole bunch . . ."

Bob Slaughter was in his towering rage. She could feel its awesome force at this distance. She could see how viciously he was spurring his horse, so losing his head that he was pitting his own weight and strength against the bull's struggles, his whole massive body jerking backward in the saddle everytime he pulled on that rope. Vainly, Kettle and Solo Sam were trying to wedge their animals in on the flanks to turn the mill, but their efforts were lost in the general wheeling motion of the whole herd. It was rapidly becoming a great vortex of frenzied steers, that grulla the hub of the wheel. Even Paul could see how it was going now. He was leaning forward on the seat beside Gail.

"He'll lose them," he said between his teeth. "He'll lose the whole bunch. Damn you, Slaughter, they'll drown each other and they'll all go down."

It was ghastly to watch, that great, turgid, circular motion of bawling, crazed animals, becoming faster and faster. Countless horns flashed and dipped and disappeared in the rocking rolling bodies. The first dead steer floated into sight fifty yards away from the herd. He had been crushed and trampled under, the carcass kicked and whirled along beneath those hooves until it was free of the herd, then thrown up from the violent tide of the river like so much driftwood. The mill was in full tilt now, Kettle and Waco spun around on the fringe helplessly, Slaughter out there still battling madly with the leader, his terrible rage blinding him to what was happening. The awesome, certain finality of it brought the name unconsciously to Gail's lips.

"Pothooks," she said, "Pothooks."

IT WAS as if he had heard, though she had not spoken it loud enough to reach him. There was a violent blur of movement past her, and she saw him running. The Caverango Kid had left his remuda in timber, and brought his horse up on a higher portion of the bank above the wagons to watch the mill, and it was toward him Pothooks ran.

"Give me those guthooks, Kid," shouted the cook, grabbing for the Kid's right boot and unbuckling the spur. He leaned down to snap it on his own boot, and by that time, the Kid had lifted his other foot up to take the right spur off. Pothooks grabbed this and put it on and then pulled the Kid down off his horse. The cook spun the animal around to get on the left side, jumping high so that his left foot hit the oxbow the same time his rump hit the saddle.

Then he raked the can openers across the animal's flanks and drove it off the bank in a great leap. Man and beast disappeared completely in the water, to bob up ten yards beyond, swirled around and around by the heavy, churning tide. Then the undertow formed by the milling herd caught him, pulling the horse in fast against the outer fringe of cattle.

"He can't do anything," said Paul shrilly. "Nobody could break that mill from the outside now. They're lost, Gail, they're through—"

But Marrs was not trying to stop them from the outside. He had jumped from his horse onto the backs of the cattle. They were packed in so close it was like walking across logs. A tossing horn caught him across the belly, knocking him backward, and for a moment, Gail thought he was gone. He slipped between two great heaving bodies up to the waist.

But before they could pin him, he had caught another horn, pulling himself up. Then, dodging those great slashing horns, ducking aside from a violent, blind toss of a brindle head, jumping the heaving hump of a speckled white steer, he made his way toward the center of the mill. She could see him swing an arm in Slaughter's direction to emphasize the words his roaring, surly shout carried to Gail.

"Quit fighting that *golondrino*, damn you, he's just exciting hell out of all the rest."

Slaughter at last must have realized what his actions were causing, for he tried to get slack enough in his rope to slip it off the steer he had been battling. But the

steer kept shifting away, tangling the rope up among the other cattle. The clothesline was tied hard and fast on the saddle horn of Slaughter's rig, and seeing that he could not free it from the animal, he began to tear wildly at the knot on his horn. But it had become wet, and Gail could see he was not having any success. The *golondrino* was going its merry, wild way, pulling Slaughter with it, now, its crazy bawls and frenzied struggles exhorting the rest of the herd into a rising, maddened crescendo of sound and movement.

Gail saw Marrs' mouth move in a curse that did not carry this far, and he whipped his Walker from his belt. Its sullen boom beat flatly across the other bedlam. Once. Twice. The *golondrino* heaved half its bulk out of the water, blood spurting from the wounds to redden the tide about it.

"Now cut it loose, damn you," he screamed at Slaughter. The trail boss fished his Barlow from a hip pocket, whipping it open, and slashed at the rope in a desperate effort to cut it before the drowning steer pulled his horse under. Balancing delicately on the constantly shifting animals, kicking and jumping and rolling like a logger in white water, leaping from back to back, falling to his knees and scrambling erect again, face bloody from the slash of a horn, shirt ripped across his belly, Marrs finally made it to the grulla leader. He straddled the beast like a horse, grasping its horns to hang on. Then Gail understood why he had gotten those spurs.

His legs were out of sight, but his torso jerked with the force of raking the beast with those guthooks, and the burning pain caused the grulla to rear up, emitting its agony in a great bawling bellow. It had been resigning itself apathetically to the general movement of the herd, allowing itself to be spun round and round by the others, but this violent surging motion carried it against them in a decisive movement. Marrs pointed its head with his grip on those horns, spurring it once more.

Again the steer gave a great, leaping surge. It broke the inner ranks this time, turning the others partway in the same direction. Once more, Marrs spurred the animal. Its bawling sound held the frenzy of unbearable pain. Madly, it fought forward to escape those terrible guthooks, trampling under a great brindle heifer, literally crawling across the back of a floundering black. Others turned to get out of the way, and centrifugal pressure forced still others into the path the grulla had left behind, turning after it. This formed a gradually growing movement in one direction.

The pressure of this began to turn the outer ranks, and gave Waco and Solo Sam and Kettle a chance to get free and help keep the movement going. And all the time, Marrs was driving the lead steer out.

Scrambling, bawling, fighting, screaming, the beast finally broke the back of the milling ranks, and they began to give more easily. Finally Marrs was on the fringe, and in another moment would be free.

Gail saw it happen the same time she heard the cry. It was a sharp, frightened cry, hardly loud enough to be noticed above the other sounds, but it turned her head enough to see Solo Sam go off his horse. He had been working in the fringes, but there was still enough of the mill left to trap him in a swirl of earthen colored bodies and flailing, clashing horns.

"It's Sam," cried Waco, from near the shore. "I can't reach him, Slaughter. You're the nearest. Get him before he goes under."

SLAUGHTER had cut himself free of the *golondrino*, and with his rope trailing in the water, had moved his swimming horse over near enough to Marrs to take advantage of the breaking mill, wedging himself into a rank of cows and turning them toward the opposite bank.

"He'll be all right," he shouted. "Tell him to tail his horse. I leave these critters now and we'll lose them again."

"He ain't got no horse, damn you," shouted Waco, trying to drive his own animal through a solid phalanx of cattle in a futile attempt to reach Sam. "Oh, damn you, Slaughter, you could do it, you're the only one."

Either Slaughter had not heard him, or ignored him, for he was driving his ranks of cattle into a straight run for the bank, breaking the mill for good with the pressure of Marrs' grulla coming in behind. Marrs turned to look back, and then scrambled erect on the grulla, and began to make his way back across them that way. The wagon seat trembled with Paul's vio-

lent movement beside Gail. His voice beat vitriolically against her ears.

"Oh, no, you damn fool, they'll mill again, they'll mill again—"

She felt the appalled darkness filling the glance she turned on her husband. He saw it, and a surprised look crossed his face. Her mouth twisted down with more expression that she had allowed him to see in months, and then she turned back. With the drive of the grulla gone, the cattle had started to turn back into the mill, packing together again, and it was across this that Marrs went, sometimes on his belly, moving inevitably back toward the spot Solo Sam had gone under. Gail's breath blocked her throat with the certainty that he would never make it.

But he did. And when he reached the two steers swimming at the spot where Sam had gone done, he jammed a leg down, separating their dripping, shiny bodies. A bloody arm popped up, and he swung down a hand for it, missing. The arm disappeared. Face turned down, Marrs crawled across the back of a huge mulberry stag, moving inward on the mill. Then he reached down between the mulberry and the next steer, grasping for something Gail couldn't see.

There was a violent shift in the ranks, and he disappeared between the two bodies. Gail heard the strangled sound she made, and found herself standing on the wagon seat, staring fixedly out there.

Marrs' head bobbed up again. A thick, hairy arm hooked over the catback of a black steer, the shirt sleeve torn off to the shoulder. Muscles rippled like fat snakes beneath the white skin, pulling him belly-down over the black. He had a body slung under his other arm. It was Solo Sam, a slack, limp figure in the cook's grip.

Marrs got to his hands and knees on their backs once more. This last trip was the most harrowing thing Gail had ever experienced. It had been deadly enough making his way across that precarious corduroy surface of constantly shifting, heaving, turning backs, alone. Now he had to carry Sam with him. Twice Marrs slipped and almost went under. Waco Garrett was near enough to shore so that Gail could see tears streaming down his face every time its profile turned far enough this way. The Caverango Kid had waded out to his waist in the river, staring in a charmed way at the scene. It was about as far to shore as it was back to the grulla, and Marrs had chosen the steer.

Doggedly, stubbornly, tenaciously, Marrs crawled and bellied and snaked across the steers, jammed up again like logs. He was apparently too played out even to try to gain his feet. His shirt was ripped from him and his whole body was bloody. Once, a shift in their movement flashed his face this way. It was twisted in a ghastly, fixed grimace that showed the bone whiteness of teeth beneath the black line of his mustache.

Finally he made it, throwing Sam belly down across the grulla, straddling it once more as a man would sit a horse. And once more began that game of breaking the mill, the jerk of his body that told the vicious swipe of those spurs, the screaming lunge of the tiring steer, the ranks giving with painful, maddening reluctance.

When he finally broke free, with the mill stopped, and the other steers following their slate leader to shore, pushed on by the riders, Gail found herself still standing in the seat, her whole body so stiff the muscles were twitching with tension across her back and belly and legs. With a sob, she collapsed onto the seat. The Caverango Kid was still standing up to the waist in the turgid, murky flow, hands fisted at his sides, staring across at Marrs.

"My God," he was saying, over and over, "My God. My God . . ."

Gail saw the grulla reach the other side. Marrs slid off and lay on his belly in the shallows. Kettle sidled in and dragged him to dry ground, dropping him once more to lie moveless on his stomach. They dragged Solo Sam off, sitting him up against a tree. Windy and Pata Pala came by with the drags of the herd, putting it into the muddy water. Gail found herself huddled over on the seat, crying very quietly.

VI

THERE was something reassuring about the soft crackle of campfires, after the terrible, violent uncertainty of a few hours before. The rich, humid scent of wet spring earth filled the night. Bob Slaughter leaned against the head of the chuck wagon, hands in hip pockets. He could not help marvel at the incredible

vitality of Marrs. The man had recovered from that grueling experience in half an hour, and had been able to help the men get the wagons across the Red, after the herd had been safely put onto ground. Now, five miles north of the Red, he was going about his duties of the evening meal as casually as if it were the end of an ordinary day.

Slaughter shrugged. That was youth. Maybe Marrs was younger than he looked. Then a bitter, driving reaction to that swept up in Slaughter. Youth, hell. What did that have to do with it? He could match Marrs every foot of the way. He could take on any kid half his age and play him out and still have enough vinegar left to dance all night. Youth didn't have anything to do with it. He thrust his body away from the wagon, walking over toward Waco Garrett, where the man sat cross-legged, toying with his food. He felt Windy's eyes on him, and cut a glance at him. Windy was looking his way, but a blank, opaque withdrawal filled the old man's eyes as he met Slaughter's glance. Slaughter turned back to Waco as he halted by him.

"You feel good enough to ride first guard with Pata Pala tonight?"

Waco looked up. There was a moment of empty silence. Part of it was filled with Waco's palpable effort to relax the drawn muscles of his face.

"Sure, Bob. I'm all right."

"What's the matter?" said Slaughter.

Waco's eyes seemed to be looking right through him. "Nothing, Bob. My stomach's all right."

"I don't mean that," said Slaughter. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Bob," said Waco, in a hollow voice. He rose and took his dish over to the wreck pan, dumping it in. At the off-wheel of the wagon, he let his eyes pass across Slaughter once more. Then he was beyond, going for his night horse in the remuda.

"Don't you really know what the matter is, Bob?" asked Gail, from over to one side. He wheeled to see her standing in some scrub elm, the buffalo brush forming a silver background for the soft folds of her calico skirt. Her face was pale. Her eyes caught the light like a cat's, gleaming flat and green for an instant, then lost in shadow with the slight turn of her head. He moved over to her, running a hand irritably through the yellow mane of his hair. They were out of earshot from the others here, and he spoke in a guttural, frustrated voice.

"What do you mean, Gail?"

"I'm talking about Solo Sam," she said.

"What about Solo Sam?" he said.

"Don't spar, Bob," she told him.

"Listen," he said. "The boy took his chances just like the rest of us. If I'd left those leaders, the mill would have started all over again and we'd have lost the whole herd."

"Is that worth a boy's life?" she said.

"Is that the thanks I get for saving your herd?"

"*You,*" she said, letting something caustic thread it.

"Oh, hell," he said. "You know what I mean. Of course it was Marrs. It was just the choice I made, that's all. I was thinking of your herd, Gail. Of you. If our places had been switched, I wouldn't have expected Sam to come after me."

"And if you had the choice to make over again, it would be the same one." It was more a statement than a question.

He stared at her, knowing the incrimination his answer would cause him. "I would," he said quietly.

"At least you have the courage of your convictions," she said, and again she allowed some of her feeling to color the words, and it was more loathing this time.

"Don't say it like that, Gail," he told her. "A man has his decisions to make and he makes them according to his ethics."

"And they show what kind of a man he is more than all the talk in the world," she said.

"Did I ever try to deny what I was," he said.

"Honesty isn't the only virtue," she told him.

He grasped her arms, moving in closer to her, excited by the faint warmth exuding from her body, the scented nearness of her, the pale halo of taffy hair just beneath his chin.

"Don't be like that, Gail. I don't care if the men hold it against me. A trail boss gets the blame for it all anyway. Nothing he does is right. I'd expect it from them. But you—"

"What about me?"

"Gail," he muttered. "Would it help if I admitted it was a mistake?"

"No," she said. "Because I'd know you were lying. At least be consistent, Bob. It's one of the few things left in you I can admire."

SHE tore loose and moved toward the linchpin. She passed Marrs about twenty feet away, but there was something in the fleeting, almost furtive glance she put across him that raised a strange, indefinable jealousy in Slaughter. He made a guttural sound deep in his throat. Then, releasing the anger in movement, he headed toward the remuda in a long, driving stride, like the pace of a huge, caged beast, calling to Caverango to cut out his roping horse. It was his favorite animal, a big quarter horse, with a black stripe down its back. He took it from the boy and led it over to his gear, thrown down a little apart from the other sougans. He heaved his heavy Porter rig up with one arm, and as he was taking a hitch in the trunk strap of the latigo, Don Vargas wandered over.

"You going for a drink at the Station House, maybe."

"Maybe," said Slaughter, angrily.

"Can I go too, maybe?"

Slaughter turned to face him squarely, jaw muscles bulging in the ruddy, weathered flesh. "What do you think about Sam?"

Don Vargas shrugged narrow shoulders. "I always say a man takes his own chances on the trail, Roberto."

"At least I've got one intelligent man in my crew," said Slaughter, tugging the trunk strap cinch home with a vicious grunt. "Come on. Let's go."

Grinning, Don Vargas ran out to get his horse. He came back with the prancing black, its coat glistening from the recent rain. Slaughter glanced disgustedly at it.

"Why don't you trade that weedy Arab for a decent cowpony. He couldn't cut a biscuit."

"Valgame Dios," swore the Mexican, heaving his centerfire rig on. "You are talking about a descendant in a straight line from El Morzillo, the war horse Cortez himself brought to Mexico in his conquest, one of the first horses on this continent. He is no weedy Arab, *amigo,* he is a barb of the hottest blood, and he'll make your Texas cowponies look like prairie dogs."

"Then beat me to the Station House," shouted Slaughter, raking his roper with his Petneckey's.

"Hola," shouted Don Vargas, and his immense cartwheel spurs made a flash in the firelight, and his black mount leaped forward.

They raced right through the middle of camp and Windy had to move fast to get out of their way, spilling his supper on the ground. Slaughter didn't give a damn, letting the wind whip his hatbrim back against its crown, trying to empty out all the gathered venom of the past hours in the wild ride.

They trampled through scarlet mallow and dodged into a motte of blackjack. Slaughter ducked a branch and it knocked his hat off to swing behind him in the wind by the tie-thong around his neck. He bent low over the horse, glorying in its delicate response to the slightest pressure of his reins, veering it around a big cottonwood with the slightest switch of his hand, turning it out of the trees into a muddy, rutted road by barely touching the off-rein against its neck.

The Quarter blood in the roper had given it the jump on Don Vargas, but now the barb's bottom was beginning to tell, and Slaughter could hear the sloppy beat of hooves in the muck behind. He gave the roper those Petneckey's again, and it surged into a greater burst of speed, barrel heaving in a labored way between his legs. He saw a big Murphy freighter stalled hub-deep in the mud ahead and tore about one side of it, leaving the angry shouts of the splattered teamsters behind. Again he drove the spurs into the roper, and headed it into a crazy, headlong run for the last quarter mile to the deadfall at Red River Station.

He pulled his heaving, steaming horse back on its hocks before the low-roofed log building set on the bluffs and jumped off, throwing the reins across the hitchrack with half a dozen others. He shouldered through the door without waiting for Don Vargas. It was an evil den, with sawdust covering the floor and reeking of stale cigars and rotten liquor and foul river mud. There were already a dozen

trail drivers and hands at the round deal tables, and they hailed him.

He went over to where a bald, scarred man with a broken nose and mashed ears stood behind the bar, serving the liquor in big tin mugs from a row of barrels set on racks, against the wall.

"None of that tanglefoot, Katz," he said, leaning his elbows on the bar. "Give me some decent sugar-top."

"For you, Bob, anything," said Katz, leaning beneath the bar to open a bung there. The ride had blotted out Slaughter's snaky mood for a moment, but he could feel it coming back now. Don Vargas came through the door, wiping his sweating face with a red bandana.

"*Madre Dios,* you kicked mud in my face all the way down."

"You and your greaser tripe," said Slaughter sullenly, taking half the mugful of whiskey in one gulp. "I've never seen you come through yet with something from below the border. Why don't you get smart?" He slammed the cup on the bar. "Fill it again, Katz."

"On me," Rickett told the man, from behind.

SLAUGHTER wheeled sharply. The short, curly-headed man stood there with that facile smile pinned on his face. He had changed his string tie for a flowered cravat and his Prince Albert for a maroon fustian. Slaughter spotted Thibodaux beyond Don Vargas, leaning against the bar.

Standing at Rickett's shoulder was a man taller and heavier than Slaughter, his curly mat of red hair burned almost gold on the top by the sun, his short, hoary beard turned almost black across the bottom from constant contact with a red wool shirt that didn't look as if it had ever been washed. He had a Navy Colt stuck naked through his belt, and his muddy boots were flat-heeled.

"Still jayhawking, Jared?" said Slaughter, sarcastically.

"Better'n letting my friends die in the river," said Jared Thorne, revealing battered, chipped teeth with his broad grin.

The dull flush crept clear to the roots of Slaughter's hair, but it was Rickett who spoke, that bland smile curling his mouth.

"We heard how you almost had a mill. It would have been too bad to lose so many fine cattle. If that cook of your's hadn't stopped it, the whole herd might well have drowned."

The memory of it cut Slaughter like a knife. Guy Bedar, with that *golondrino.* He hadn't connected it. *Guy Bedar.* He bent toward Rickett, the bunching jaw muscles filling out down into his neck until the two great muscles there stood out thick as dally ropes.

"*You,*" he said, gutturally, "*you...had Bedar do that!*"

Rickett smiled blandly. "The story's all over, Bob. Must be two or three trail herds camped along the river, and they've all heard it by now. First the Caverango Kid, now Solo Sam. Who do you think the cook will get on his side next?"

Slaughter's fists began opening and closing at his sides. The fumes of that bourbon were beginning to fill his head now. Rickett let his glance move to Thibodaux, then back to Slaughter.

"How does it feel to lose control over your crew?" said Rickett.

"I'm not losing control over anything," said Slaughter. "But if you keep riding this horse, I will."

"You can't hide it when a crew's disaffected," said Rickett. "Every man in those other trail herds knows what your men think of you."

"The hell they do," said Slaughter, his guttural voice rising higher. "My men don't think any different than they did on the other side of the river."

Rickett spread his hands. "Take it easy, Slaughter. I'm just trying to show you what's happening. The river was just the beginning. That cook won't be around to pull out your bacon every time. Jared here says there's Indian trouble farther north."

"And jayhawker trouble?" asked Slaughter.

That broad grin brought half-moon creases about the corners of Jared Thorne's mouth. "Lots of rough characters up around the Canadian River, Slaughter. Some small herd tried to beat you through to Dodge. Got cut up so bad they turned back."

"Oh, quit dragging it around outside the corral like this," said Slaughter, sud-

denly disgusted with the whole thing. "Get out. Get away from me."

He saw the puzzled light in Don Vargas' eyes as he turned back to the bar, reaching for the mug Katz had refilled. Then he felt Rickett's body brush him as the man moved in beside him.

"You don't seem to get the point, Slaughter. If the cook don't get the whole crew away from you and finally get your job first, something else can happen. All the way up to Dodge it can happen. That river was only an illustration. On the other hand, if you do what I suggested before, we can take care of Pothooks Marrs with appalling ease. And we can see that nothing happens otherwise."

"Rickett," said Slaughter, with terrible restraint, "if you don't leave me right now I'm going to clean up this room with you."

"Now, don't be like that, Slaughter—"

"Damn you," yelled Slaughter, and let all the gathered venom of this day spill out as he whirled with the mug in his hand at the end of his outstretched arm. It came around and hit Rickett full in the face, knocking him down the bar into Don Vargas. Slaughter saw Jared Thorne move, and jumped on down the bar for Rickett again. Thorne had driven for him, and could not stop himself from crashing into the bar where Slaughter had stood. Don Vargas had turned to grapple with Thibodaux, preventing him from drawing his weapon. It gave Slaughter a chance to get Rickett again before the man could recover.

He grabbed Rickett by the front of his coat and heaved him across the room into a table, roaring wildly. Cowhands jumped back, upsetting their chairs, as the table overturned beneath Rickett. Slaughter jumped across at him again, bringing his fist around in a savage haymaker that caught Rickett full in the face and knocked him back the other way.

Coming toward Slaughter, Thorne had to dodge aside to avoid being carried back into the bar by Rickett. Then Rickett struck the bar with a great thud. His sharp, broken cry pierced the room.

Thorne was charging for Slaughter. Slaughter met him with an eager shout, blocking Thorne's clumsy blow with his right, bringing his left into the man's belly with all the animal strength of him. The force of the blow, coupled with Thorne's oncoming impetus, drove Slaughter's arm right into his shoulder until he thought it had been torn out of joint.

It only stopped the man's charge part way, and Slaughter was carried backward, almost falling over the upturned table, until his back came up against the wall, with Thorne against him. The man was still sick with that blow, and could not stop Slaughter from shoving him away and striking again. It was in the guts again, and Thorne bent over the blow with a ghastly sound. It put the back of his neck to Slaughter, and the trail boss dropped a fist like a hammer there. Thorne went on down to the floor. Slaughter drew back his foot and kicked him as hard as he could in the face.

Then he turned from the man to see that Thibodaux had thrown Don Vargas off toward the door. The Mexican had stumbled on spike heels to the doorframe, catching himself there, and trying to draw his gun.

But the hammer had caught on his fancy silver belt, hanging up, and all his jerking would not pull it free.

"Roberto," he bleated.

"Never mind," panted Slaughter. "I got his number."

Thibodaux wheeled to face him. For one instant suspended in time they hung there, staring at each other, both men inclined forward slightly, both with their elbows hooked out a little. After the bedlam of crashing furniture and shouting men, the abrupt silence filling the room was startling.

Rickett stood against the bar, holding himself up by one elbow, dabbing at the blood covering his face in a weak, irrelevant way. The breath came out of him in a sobbing wheeze. He seemed to become aware of them, and raised himself up slightly, staring from Thibodaux to Slaughter. He did not try to hide the ruthless malice in his eyes. His lips curled in that smile with some effort, but it held no humor. It held a brutal, savage vindication.

Perhaps it was what the Creole had been waiting for.

"All right, Thibodaux," Rickett said. "Go ahead. Kill him."

VII

IT WAS usually foggy in the morning this near the river. Pothooks Marrs climbed down from the chuck wagon, shivering with the chill. He saw the fires already going, and the Caverango Kid setting up the Dutch ovens. Usually the wrangler acted as swamper for the cook, when he wasn't herding the spare animals, but there was something special, something almost worshipful about the way the Kid showed up every morning, after checking the hobbled remuda, to marvel at Marrs' culinary skill.

Marrs went over to the let-down lid of the wagon and started making dough, rolling it out to proper thickness with a beer bottle. Then he got four pie tins and lined their bottoms, dumping dried apples into this. After putting on the upper crust, he carved a Pickle Bar into each one with his Barlow knife. The Kid had hunkered by one of the fires, stirring it idly with a stick, his eyes on those square, hairy hands all the time.

"Pie," he wanted to know, "for breakfast?"

"I thought you come from Texas?" said Marrs.

"I do," said the Kid. "We had it at home for breakfast. But never on the trail. Slaughter told the last cook—"

"Where is Slaughter?" asked Marrs, glancing over at the man's empty sougan.

"Went to the Station House last night," said Waco, coming up with both hands on his belly. "He always does that when something gets his goat. I don't see how he throws a drunk like that and then comes back and puts in the kind of day's work he does. It would kill an ordinary man."

"He'll burn himself out sooner or later," said Marrs. "Your belly hurting?"

"Like hell," Waco told him. "Where's that paregoric?"

Marrs reached into the shelf holding assorted bottles of medicine. When he upended the paregoric into a tin cup, only a couple of drops leaked out.

"What the hell did you do with it?" said Waco caustically. "There was plenty left when I took it last time." He did not miss Marrs' aborted glance toward the linchpin, and began to curse viciously. "I might of known. Helluva doctor you are. That Butler don't need it any more than you do. You knew that. Why did you give it to him anyway?"

Marrs' eyes squinted. "I didn't."

"Don't try and lie out of it," berated the man, viciously. "Of all the low-down, ornery, snaky things to do, that's the worst. I ought to take my pistol to you."

"Now wait a minute," said Marrs. "What kind of hurt is it?"

"What does it matter?" said Waco, starting to turn away.

Marrs grabbed him by the arm, spinning him back against the wagon with such force it knocked a pile of plates off the chuck box lid. "What kind of hurt is it?" he snarled. "A postoak swipe you across the belly?"

The man's pinched face held a dazed surprise. "Yeah. Let go. The doc said it probably bruised my intestines."

"You stay right here," said Marrs. "Move a step and I'll take that machete to you."

"What the hell?"

Turning away, Marrs got a can of tallow he used for lard. He poured this into the frying pan and set it over one of the fires. Then he got the blackstrap sorghum and filled a tin cup partway up with this. When the tallow was sizzling and melted, he poured it into the sorghum, and finally added a little powdered alum from the medicine chest.

"Let that cool, and down it," he told Waco. "I've seen my ma give it to more than one brush hand with his guts hurt like yours."

"That slum will burn hell out of me if there's an open sore down there," muttered the man.

"You use it to burn out proud flesh on a rope burn, don't you? said Marrs. "And then the burn heals right up. That tallow and blackstrap will keep it from hurting. They'll line your guts all the way down. You'll be surprised how soothing it is."

"I never saw such a gezabo," said Waco, staring into the cup, still unconvinced. "One minute he's beating your head in, the next he's mothering you like an old hen with her chicks."

Marrs finished cooking and beat on a wreck pan with a running iron, shouting for them to come and get it. Yawning,

rubbing sleep from their eyes, they appeared to get their plates and tools.

"Well," observed Pata Pala, looking at the pie. "Boggy top. If it has as much soda in it as them hot rocks last night, I'll be yellow as jaundice."

"You don't need soda to get that color," Marrs told him.

"Don't get oily," flushed the peglegged man. "I'll punch holes in your skull with my stick foot."

"Reminds me of what Sluefoot Sue looked like after Pecos Bill got through shooting her out of the clouds," said Windy.

"Ah, put a hobble on your jaw," Pata Pala growled. "I'm tired of hearing you blow."

"Why don't you let him finish," said Marrs. "I never heard him tell a story through yet."

Windy looked gratefully at Marrs. "Sure thing. Pecos Bill had a hawss named Widow Maker. Nobody else had ever rid the beast. When he proposed to Sluefoot Sue—"

"Man at the pot," shouted Pata Pala, as Solo Sam got up to pour himself another cup of coffee, "man at the pot—"

"You'll get your java when Windy finishes the story," shouted Marrs, angered by the man's insistence.

"I'll get it or dump this bacon."

"Dump that bacon and I'll dump this coffee right on your head!"

PATA Pala turned over his plate. Marrs grabbed the three gallon coffee pot and upended it on Pata Pala's head. The scalding, inky brew spewed out over the peglegged man's shoulders. He danced away, his screams muffled by the pot over his head. Marrs scooped up the running iron and followed him, tripping him backward so that he fell in a sitting position against the wheel of the chuck wagon.

When Pata Pala made an effort to rise and get the pot off his head, Marrs struck the top of it with the running iron. It made a clanging sound. Pata Pala, stiffened, dropping his hands quickly.

"Now, you finish your story," Marrs told Windy.

"Well," began Windy, hesitantly, staring at the peglegged man. "Sluefoot said she'd marry Pecos if he let her ride Widow Maker. When Sluefoot got on, the hawss bucked the old gal so high she went through a thunderhead and it started raining. That's what caused the flood of '59—"

Pata Pala made another effort to take the pot off. That iron clanged on its top once more. Pata Pala subsided.

"—Sluefoot had some of them newfangled hoop skirts on, and them steel hoops was just like springs every time she hit, bouncing her right back up. She went so high nobody could git her down. Pecos finally had to shoot her down to keep her from starving to death." Windy shook his head from side to side, grinning foolishly. Then a vague surprise filled his wizened face, and he stared around at them. "Well, I did finish, didn't I?" He looked at Marrs with the shining eyes of a starving dog fed a bone. "You know, Pothooks, that's the first time these jaspers let me tell one clear through since I signed on to Pickle Bar."

A quick, gleaming smile fluttered Marrs' lips. Then he lifted the pot off Pata Pala's head. Rubbing his wet, sooty head, winking coffee grounds out of his eyes, the peglegged man jumped to his feet with a roar. He made such a ludicrous picture that the crew burst out laughing. He glared around at them.

"You got the best of it this time and you might as well admit it," Solo Sam shouted.

A grin started at the corners of Pata Pala's mouth, and he could not control it. Pretty soon the chuckles began to shake his beefy gut. He looked down at the coffee pot, reaching up with a little finger to clean coffee grounds out of his ear.

"I guess you're right," he said, and started to go on, but the sight of something beyond the wagons halted him, his mouth still partly open. Don Vargas was coming in with Bob Slaughter slung across the buckskin Quarter horse, head dangling on one side, heels on the other. The whole crew gathered round as soon as the Mexican halted the animals.

"Is he dead?" asked Caverango, in hushed awe.

"Only from drink," said Don Vargas. "He drank up all the rot-gut in the Station House last night and wrecked the place.

I been dodging through the blackjack ever since with him like this. I was afraid to bring him back to camp for fear the soldiers would be here. There was a whole troop of them from Fort Sill stationed on the river, and they're all looking for Slaughter."

"Not just for cleaning out the Station House?" said Marrs.

"No," Don Vargas told him. "He got drunk and wrecked everything after he killed Thibodaux. The soldiers want him for murder."

THE uproar of breaking camp filled the blackjack. Pots and pans rattled as Pothooks threw his cooking gear into the chuckbox and kicked the fires out. Horses whinneyed and rigging creaked as men saddled up, shouting to each other. Kettle Cory and Guy Bedar were already out getting the cattle up off their bed ground, and the low bawling of the beeves formed a monotonous undertone to other sounds. Don Vargas and Pata Pala were alternately pouring the last of the coffee down Slaughter and dunking his head in a pail of river water in an effort to bring him out of the stupor. Hearing a stir behind the chuck wagon, Marrs went back that way to find Gail Butler standing by the tail gate, taffy hair done up in a chignon, a strained look to her face.

"Have you got any other medicine besides the paregoric?" she said. "Paul's feeling bad again."

"What do you mean, *besides* the paregoric?" asked Marrs.

"Waco needs that," she told him. "It's the only thing that will help him."

The restrained bitterness in his face must have reached her then, and her attention was drawn to the bottle still resting on the lid of the chuckbox where Marrs had left it. She picked it up and shook it hard.

"Did Waco use it up?" she asked.

"No," said Marrs. "He was in a lot of pain."

She held out her hand in spasmodic reaction. "Pothooks, you don't think that I—" Then she broke off, her eyes losing their focus for an instant, to widen in the shock of some obscure understanding. Then they squinted, and the flush of shame crept up her neck. The whole misjudgment he had made struck him, then, and he felt like a fool.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry—"

"*You're* sorry," she said, pulling herself up. "What for? Getting it in the neck from Waco when he thought you'd given me the medicine? I imagine he can be very acid, can't he? I won't even apologize for that, Pothooks. Paul's my husband. If he's sick, I'm going to do whatever is necessary to help him—"

"Don't defend him, Gail," said Pothooks. "He isn't worth it. You were ashamed a minute ago. It wasn't for yourself. If you'd gotten that paregoric, you would have the courage of your convictions. It was Paul who got it. More for spite than anything else. Wasn't it?"

She faced him a moment longer, deep bosom filling the crinoline with the heavy breath she took in. Then all the sand drained out of her. Her eyes dropped from him. She made a small, choked sound, as if trying to keep from crying, and began to turn away. He caught her arm.

"Don't even be ashamed of him," said Pothooks. "You and I are the only ones who will ever know this." She turned back to him, eyes meeting his in a wide, stricken need for something. "It's been this way a long time, hasn't it?" he said. The unaffected simplicity of his sympathy must have been what broke through her last reserve. She leaned forward till her face almost touched his chest, speaking in a muffled, desperate way.

"Yes, Pothooks, and I don't think I can stand it much longer. Years of it. Like a child. Tantrums and drunks and dirty, sneaking, childish little tricks like this, anything to humiliate me or shame me or hurt me, accusing me of love affairs with every man on the trail, of stealing his pocket money, of trying to poison him.

"It isn't this sickness, these last years. No wife could complain of that. You couldn't even excuse him by saying the sickness had changed him, that he wasn't himself—half the time I don't think he's sick at all. You don't know how ghastly he makes it..."

Her voice faded out, and her hand closed on his arm, as if realizing the release she had allowed herself. She drew

her head back, forcing her eyes to meet his, and he saw the shame start again.

"Now, don't be like that," he said, softly. "If I'd let my hair down with you, I wouldn't be ashamed of it afterwards. I'd know you understood. You've got to feel the same way with me. You wouldn't have got as personal in the first place if you hadn't felt some sympathy in me. You got to let the poison out sometime, Gail. You can't just let it fester and rot in there forever. If you had to get it off your chest, I consider it a privilege that it was with me."

Her mouth parted in a faint surprise. Then her head began moving from side to side in a faint motion, as if trying to understand something, her underlip glistening wetly. When she finally spoke, it was in a strange, husky voice.

"I can't reconcile it," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"In you," she said. "This kindness, this warmth...and..."

"And what?" His eyes were narrowing with the effort of trying to fathom her, and a sharp suspicion was forming in his mind.

"Do you know, Pothooks," she said, "that before we crossed the Red, I was going to fire you. And then, when you saved Sam's life like that—" she made a small, defeated gesture with her hand—"I—I just couldn't."

Before they could go on, Bob Slaughter lurched around the end of the chuck wagon, his yellow hair still dripping, to throw his cup in the wreck pan. It made a loud clatter in the abrupt silence. Marrs realized for the first time how close he had been holding Gail, with one arm about her waist. For a moment, just before Slaughter spoke, he was acutely aware of the scented softness of her body, and its effect on him. He pulled away.

"Having a little tete-a-tete?" asked Slaughter, sarcastically.

"That killing is going to cause Mrs. Butler a lot of trouble," said Marrs. "I don't think you have a right to any sarcasm."

Slaughter's eyes were bloodshot, his face puffy. "That's just it. Mrs. Butler. Did you forget she was a married woman."

"That sounds ironic, coming from you," Gail told him caustically. Then the tone of her voice changed. "Bob, you don't understand—"

"I think I do," he said, bitterly. "What I offered you was honest compared with—" his lips twisted on the word—"this."

Marrs let his head sink into his shoulders, lowering it slightly to stare at Slaughter. "Do you want to apologize to Gail?"

"I don't think it's necessary," said Slaughter.

"Maybe I better make it necessary," Marrs told him.

"POTHOOKS," cried Gail, and then Don Vargas stopped the whole thing by swinging in on his black and speaking loudly to Slaughter.

"What are you wasting time for, Roberto? If those soldiers don't hit our camp soon, Jared Thorne will."

Gail's head jerked upward. "*He* was there."

Marrs stared at Don Vargas, then snapped around to Slaughter again. "Why didn't you say so? If his jayhawkers are around here, this trail through the blackjack is the worst route in the world to follow.

"They can jump us from timber within fifty feet of the cattle on either side. Why don't you turn west along the river till the country opens up?"

"No cook is driving my cattle," said Slaughter.

Solo Sam had saddled his day horse and brought it over toward them. "He's right, Bob. No use taking more chances than need be."

"We're driving those cattle the way I started them," said Slaughter, his voice growing louder.

"And letting your men in for a nice ride to hell on a shutter, anytime Jared Thorne so chooses," said Pothooks. "Is that the way you figure?"

"I figure if a man hasn't got enough sand to follow where the boss leads, he shouldn't have signed up for a job like this in the first place."

"Yeah," said Pothooks. "I gathered that on the Red. It isn't the men that count. It's your reputation, most of all."

Slaughter's jaw muscles began to jump and bulge beneath the stubble of blonde hair. "You'd better get up on your

chuck wagon, Pothooks, before I tromp on you."

"Or maybe it's more than your rep," said Pothooks. "This blackjack route heads eastward, don't it? Toward Ellsworth. Was Rickett there with Thibodaux? Did he want you to drive the cattle to Ellsworth instead of Dodge?"

Slaughter inclined his heavy torso forward in a sharp spasm. "Pothooks, I told you to—"

"Why should Rickett want that?" broke in Gail. "What is this, Pothooks?"

"The gambling faction in Ellsworth stands to go smash if no cattle go in there this year," said Pothooks. "What do you think would happen if Slaughter broke through the sodbusters and defied that quarantine law and eventually got to Ellsworth?"

Gail looked toward Slaughter with narrowing eyes. "Most of the other trail herders would follow his lead. They usually do." She shook her head vaguely, lines knitting into her brow. "You didn't, Slaughter. You wouldn't—"

"Nobody's ever questioned my loyalty to the brand I work for," said Slaughter, shaking with anger.

"Maybe it's about time they did," said Marrs.

Slaughter made a spasmodic shift toward Marrs, fists clamping shut. But something held him, perhaps a realization that this was something he could not remove by merely whipping Marrs. Slaughter was a man to stand on his own feet, and Marrs had never seen him look elsewhere for reassurance, before. But now, as if his direct, brutal nature were incapable of fully coping with this, he could not seem to help the movement of his eyes toward the others.

Windy met the gaze for a moment, then dropped his own eyes uncomfortably. The open animosity in Solo Sam's face caused Slaughter to drag in a deep breath. Pata Pala's expression gave him no support; it held a blank reserve, as if the peglegged man were withholding a judgement.

"I'm not speaking for anything but the men," said Marrs. "If Thorne means to attack, you should move into open country for their sake."

"This blackjack route is shorter," said Slaughter. "No jayhawker is making me backtrack. Get on your horses and lift that herd off the bedground."

The men shifted uncertainly, none of them making a move to mount. Slaughter stared at their sullen suspicion, and his voice had raised to almost a shout. "You do think I sold out to Rickett. That's what's in your minds, isn't it?" He faced back toward Marrs, violently. "I didn't, damn you, I didn't."

"Prove it, then," said Marrs.

"I don't have to prove it," bawled Slaughter. He jumped for Solo Sam, catching his arm and spinning him toward his horse. "I gave an order. Get on your horse and ride those cattle."

It wheeled Sam in against his animal, and he had to grab a stirrup leather to keep from falling. He stood there, refusing to mount, a sullen defiance on his face.

"You can whip a crew all the way from the Gulf to Canada, Slaughter," he said. "But when the chips are down, it takes more than that to make them follow you."

SLAUGHTER whirled back to Marrs. "Tell them I didn't sell out. That's why I shot Thibodaux. Rickett was trying to force me into it. Tell them, damn you—"

"I wasn't there," said Marrs.

"You're the one causing this," said Slaughter. He had been shouting, and breathing so hard his whole torso pumped like a blowing horse. Now, suddenly, the movement of breath stopped lifting his great chest, and his voice lowered to an awesome guttural. There was murder in his eyes.

He moved to Marrs, taking three steps that put him close enough to reach out and grab the man. "Now tell them," he said. "Take that back, Pothooks. My guns are still with Pickle Bar and you know it. Take that back or I'll kill you."

"Bob," gasped Gail.

Anger lowered those thick lids over Marrs' black eyes, giving them that sulking sensuous look, and he contained himself with an effort so great his whole frame began trembling. "All you have to do is change the route, Slaughter."

"I'm not taking my orders from any greasy grub-spoiler!"

"Then take them from me," said Gail, in what was obviously a last effort to prevent what she saw coming. "I think Pothooks was right—"

"Take it back, P o t h o o k s," said Slaughter, as if he hadn't even heard Gail, giving a vicious jerk on the cook's shirt that pulled Pothooks off-balance. "I didn't sell out to Rickett and you know—"

"I'm taking nothing back," Marrs bawled, grabbing Slaughter's hands and tearing them free. Slaughter shouted hoarsely, his whole massive body whipping around with the punch he threw at Marrs. The cook ducked in under the blow. He put his head into Slaughter's belly like a butting bull, knocking the big, blond trail boss back against the chuck wagon so hard the wreck pan slid off the lid and dirty dishes spilled their clatter all over the ground.

Slaughter caught Pothooks' chin with both hands and flipped him up with such force that the cook's feet came off the ground. While Marrs was still straightened up, Slaughter hit him in the stomach. This doubled Marrs over, blinding him for a moment with the intense pain. He felt a blow lift his head again, in a shocking, jarring way, and then there was a pounding force across his back, and he knew, in the dim recesses of his consciousness, that he had struck the ground.

He rolled over and came to his feet blindly. He sensed Slaughter's rush at him and dodged aside, taking a glancing blow on the head. He caught at Slaughter's arm before the man could pull it back. Realizing his grip was on the wrist, he put his other hand on the elbow. Slaughter tried to hit him with the other fist, but Marrs twisted the arm in a swift, vicious lever, swinging around Slaughter's side at the same time, and into his back, with a hammerlock.

Before Slaughter could break it, with his towering strength, Marrs jammed up on the arm, forcing him to bend over, and then put all his weight against the man. Slaughter could not keep his face from going into the side of the chuck wagon. Gail let out a small scream at the sickening sound it made. The very intensity of the pain gave Slaughter's spasmodic struggle to free himself a violence that tore the arm from Marrs' hammerlock.

As Slaughter swung around, pawing blood from his face, Marrs hit him again. It knocked Slaughter's head aside with such a sharp jerk Pothooks thought the man's neck was broken.

Slaughter blocked the next blow with an upflung arm, and then threw himself at Pothooks. Pothooks blocked and counterpunched, catching Slaughter in the guts. Slaughter took it with a sick grunt, and caught Pothooks with a wild haymaker.

It put the cook off-balance enough for Slaughter to hit him full in the face. This knocked Marrs back, and Slaughter kept hitting him, keeping him off-balance, knocking him back and back and back. Few men could have remained erect under any one of the blows.

But with each one, Marrs let out a stubborn, grunting, animal sound of pain, stumbling back only so far as the blow knocked him, and there trying to regain enough balance to catch Slaughter.

Slaughter backed him all the way across camp, stumbling through gear and soogans, until Marrs finally reached him with a blind punch. It gave the cook time to set himself, and when Slaughter tried to return the blow, Marrs blocked it, and ducked in under, to start slugging. They stood toe to toe, meting out punishment that would have finished most men in a few seconds, slugging and grunting like a couple of bulls with locked horns.

"Stop them," sobbed Gail, "they'll kill each other."

SLAUGHTER was bigger and heavier than Marrs, possibly stronger, but in all the fights Pothooks had seen the man in, in all the battles he had heard about, the trail boss had never been forced to go his limit. Slaughter's immense, driving strength had always allowed him to finish it up quick and fast and flashy.

Now, in Pothooks' mind, was a grim, tenacious resolve to outlast Slaughter. Even now the flash was gone. It had settled down to the horse with the most bottom. It had become a terrible, awesome test of endurance. The very tenacity that Marrs had shown with the cattle mill on the Red was coming out in him again. Like a sullen, unyielding little bull he stood there, taking all Slaughter could dish out, and giving it right back.

As if sensing the man's intent, Slaughter made an effort to end it quickly, stepping back to draw in a great breath and force Marrs to take the offensive momentarily. Marrs did, with a stolid, unhurried eagerness, moving on it. Slaughter blocked his hook, stepping in to put all his weight and strength into the blow at Pothooks' guts. Pothooks could not avoid it, and the punch bent him over.

For one instant the back of Marrs' neck was exposed, Slaughter lifted his fist for that famous hammer blow that had ended his fights so many times before. But even as it came down, Marrs thrust his whole weight into Slaughter. His head was against Slaughter's belly and his arms about the man's hips when Slaughter's fist hit his neck. The gasp erupted from Marrs in a sick explosion, but he was already driving with his legs. It shoved Slaughter backward.

Stunned by the blow, Marrs nevertheless kept pushing. He felt another blow on his neck, but Slaughter was off-balance, stumbling backward, and it lacked its former force. Then they came up against the mess wagon again.

Marrs straightened, moving back far enough to slug Slaughter in the guts. Slaughter tried to keep himself straight and meet it. Again that awful slugging match began, Slaughter pinned in against the wagon, unable to avoid it. All he could do was meet Marrs blow for blow. He was tiring. His sounds, his movements, the ghastly, fixed, bloody expression on his face—all gave him away.

Marrs felt the slackening, and summoned the last concentrated force in him, catching Slaughter on the jaw with a vicious blow. It knocked Slaughter around till he was facing down the wagon. Marrs hit him again, solidly, terribly, grunting hoarsely with the awful effort. Slaughter slid down the wagon box. He tried to keep his knees from buckling, tried to drive up again. Marrs hit him once more. Slaughter made a sick, defeated sound, and sank to the ground, rolling over on his belly.

Black hair down over his eyes, shirt torn from his heavy torso, blood and sweat dribbling off his face, Marrs took one step and caught the side of the wagon to keep himself from falling. Chest heaving, he stared dazedly down at the trail boss. Then a whooping roar filled his ears. The whole crew crowded around him, slapping him on the back and yelling and congratulating him.

They half-carried him to the water butt and soused it all over him, washing off the blood. Grinning feebly, he tried in a half-hearted way to shove them off. They would have none of it. Solo Sam tore the ruined shirt off and went and got one of his own. Windy pulled a bottle of rotgut from his soogin and tilted it up at Pothooks' mouth.

The fiery liquor cleared Pothooks' head. He realized he was trembling. Then the jubilance died down.

Slaughter had pulled himself erect. He looked them over, one by one, and on his face, Pothooks saw that it was not in the man to stay and rod a crew where he had been whipped by one of them. Finally, he turned his great bleeding frame and dragged it along the wagon to the end of the box. From there to his horse, he fell twice. It was painful, watching him drag himself onto the animal. Pothooks thought he had never seen such a defeated man.

But Slaughter reined the Quarter animal around and brought it back this way, sitting slack in the saddle, breathing in a shallow, sick way. His voice, when he spoke, was weak, but there was an undertone of vitriol that could not be missed.

"You'd better pack a gun from here on out," he told Pothooks, through split, puffy, bleeding lips. "We'll meet again, sooner or later. And when we do I'm shooting on sight!"

VIII

THERE were two or three fires winking through the velvety dusk of the timber, and fifteen or twenty men gathered around them. Here and there, tarnished buttons glinted brazenly on faded blue coats, or the brim of a forage cap cut its oblique, tight line across the side of a man's head.

There was a bobble among the picketed horses beyind the fire, a sudden stirring and whinneying that should have reached the men. But they were too busy laughing and talking and eating, and only when the rider appeared in the circle of firelight did they jump to their feet, scooping old

Springields off the ground or yanking Navy pistols from their belts.

Jared Thorne shouldered his heavy way to the front. He had not drawn his gun, but his scarred, calloused hand was on the butt of it, sticking from his belt. Rickett was at his side, and when he saw who sat the horse, a nasty smile fluttered his lips.

"Well, Bob. You get caught in a stampede?" Thorne started to pull his gun, but Rickett laid a restraining hand on his wrist. "Wait, Jared. I think our trail boss has finally come to talk business."

"You still want the Pickle Bar driven to Ellsworth?" Bob Slaughter asked him. There was a chill, ugly light in his eyes.

"Yes." Rickett nodded, smiling wryly. "Yes, I suppose so."

"My way?" said Slaughter.

"What is your way?" said Rickett.

"Leave my cattle and the girl alone," said Slaughter.

"*Your* cattle?"

"Yes," said Slaughter, something dogged entering his manner. "I've driven them clear from the Nueces, Rickett. I've bottle fed calves and coddled sick heifers. I've sung to them at night and fed them every day and fought with every trail boss along the Chisolm for the best bed grounds. And then what does she do?"

The focus of his eyes had changed, looking beyond the men, and he seemed to be talking to himself more than Rickett.

"She takes up with some damn cook they pull out of a greasy spoon in Dallas. She wouldn't even believe I hadn't sold out to you. None of them would. Well, now I don't give a damn. I've quit the Pickle Bar and I owe no allegiance to anybody but Bob Slaughter. And no damn grub-spoiling, pot-hooking coosie is taking over my cattle halfway up the trail. I'm driving them through, do you hear, I'm driving them through."

"All right, Bob, all right," laughed Rickett, placatingly. "Light down and we'll talk about it."

Slaughter stepped off stiffly. His face had not been washed, and formed a grisly mask of cut, bruised, puffy flesh crusted with dried blood. His shirt hung in tatters from his massive torso, and he walked with a decided limp.

He went over to a pail of water they had carried from the river and began sloshing his face. The jayhawkers spread around him cautiously, mistrustfully, but he went on with his ablutions, supremely indifferent to them. In his mind was but one driving thought. To get Pothooks Marrs. Even more humiliating to him than the beating was the thought that another man should finish his drive north. He would be laughed at from Fort Worth to Dodge. He tore his shirt off and wiped at his face.

"You got something for me to wear?" he asked.

"Sure, sure," said Rickett. "Get him a shirt, Jared. What's this about leaving the girl alone?"

"Just that," said Slaughter. "Those cattle are still Pickle Bar. All I want is to get rid of that crew." His lips flattened across his teeth. "And leave that cook to me."

"Then what?" said Rickett.

Slaughter's eyes roved over the men. "Jared's with you, isn't he? Any of these men ever punched cows?"

"They've done about everything," said Rickett.

"They can be my crew, then," said Slaughter. "If you want those cattle in Ellsworth, you can give me this bunch to do it with. Marrs was heading for open country. They'll have those cattle lie down the Red to the West. If we can hit them before they leave the blackjacks, it'll be easier."

"Tell your men we're riding, Jared," said Rickett. He slapped Slaughter on the back, chuckling. "This is what I like now, Bob, boy. We'll just forget about that little mistake at the Station House. If Thibodaux was too slow for you, that's his bad luck. I never thought anyone could edge him out."

Slaughter nodded, taking the shirt Thorne handed him. It was old denim, for a smaller man, and it split across the laced bulk of his shoulder muscles when he put it on, but that didn't matter. He got something to eat from the fire, and stepped back on his horse. The other men were mounting in a flurry of stamping, snorting animals, and Thorne quickly kicked out the fires. Then they left, riding the best of the night westward along the bottom trails.

Marrs had the head start of a day on them, but could be no more than ten or

fifteen miles ahead. Near dawn they came across a Cheyenne camp. The Indians said Pickle Bar had passed further north late in the afternoon. Slaughter led out of the bottoms and struck the trail of cattle following the breaks through the blackjack. The howling of wolves from far off filled these parks with ghostly sound. This stopped an hour before dawn.

SLAUGHTER was beginning to feel the drain, now. He found himself dozing in the saddle, the cuts and bruises stiffened so painfully on his face that he could hardly move his mouth. Dawn light was seeping down through the timber when they came to another break, and started to cross the opening through buffalo grass wet with dew.

A startled movement from timber on the other side drew Slaughter's attention. Then a shout, and the detonation of a shot.

One of the horses beside Slaughter whinneyed and reared, and the rider kicked free and jumped before it went down. Slaughter could see the patches of a pinto horse over there now.

"It's Sam," he shouted. "They must have put him out to watch."

The deafening, rolling fire of Springfields filled his consciousness as Thorne's men began shooting. The pinto had been wheeling. It went down, and Sam with it. But he came to his feet, a long lean figure in the dim light. He backed into the tree, working his Henry with deadly effect.

Another horse went down behind Slaughter, and one of Thorne's men threw up his arms and pitched across the neck of his animal as it bolted across the timber. It put the whole bunch of them in a wild, indecisive mill.

"Looks like that cook of yours is smarter than you give him credit for," shouted Rickett, fighting his spinning horse in beside Slaughter.

"Get him," Slaughter bawled at Thorne. "Get him before he reaches Marrs."

Thorne tried to rally a bunch, leading them across the clearing in a charge. But Sam halted in the cover of the trees to empty his Henry at them. It was a sixteen-shot gun, and when horses began to go down again, they couldn't face it, breaking and scattering, leaving a man lying in the grass out there, and a wounded horse kicking and rolling farther on.

"We'll have to scatter and get around him through that timber," Rickett shouted at Thorne.

Cursing, Slaughter pulled his roper into the trees. It was so thick here he could not ride fast. He knocked his hat off on a limb. All about him was the clattering and crashing of horses. Sam must have reloaded again, for the gun started up. *Damn him,* thought Slaughter, *that noise will bring Marrs and all the Pickle Bar.*

He veered toward the sound, Colt in his hand. He saw a jayhawker ahead of him. The man pitched sideways off his horse suddenly, shouting in pain, striking a tree trunk and flopping off to lie on his back. His eyes and mouth were gaping open and there was a wet red patch in the middle of his chest. Then Slaughter saw Pata Pala, and he must have been the one who had shot the jayhawker, for his gun was wreathing smoke.

Slaughter pulled his horse in to a rearing halt for a steady shot, and over the sights of the bucking Colt in his hand saw Pata Pala's figure crumple in the saddle. The peg leg pointed skyward as the man slid off, and then disappeared over the horse's rump.

"All right," said Waco Garrett, from Slaughter's flank, "now I'll send you to hell on the same shutter," and Slaughter wheeled to see the man standing between two stunted trees with a six-gun levelled.

GAIL was within the linchpin when the shooting started. She had already dressed and was doing up her hair. Paul stirred beside her, opening his eyes, as she started to climb out.

"Get me a drink of water, will you?" he said.

"Something's happening," she said. "Can't you hear the shooting?"

"I said I wanted a drink of water—"

"Paul," she said angrily. "Can't you get it through your head. Something's happening. We're being attacked or something."

She pulled the old double-barreled Greener out with her as she dropped off the seat onto a whel, and then to the ground. Men were scrambling out of their soogins and Windy was shouting for the

Caverango Kid to bring in some horses. Pothooks Marrs ran by Gail, shouting at her over his shoulder.

"Sam had the backtrail guard for this morning. That must be him in the trees, Gail. We've got to back him up. I've left Guy Bedar and Windy on the herd. If we can't hold them, make for the river. Maybe we can prevent a stampede by putting them in the water. A mill's better than a run—"

And then he was gone, plunging into the trees. The Caverango Kid raced in bareback, pushing a cut of horses ahead of him. Don Vargas swung aboard his black, and Kettle Corey dabbed a rope on his hairy little chopping pony, and tried to walk down the clotheslines to the excited horse so he could throw a kack on.

The others hadn't bothered to mount, already disappearing into the trees after Marrs. Suddenly they were all gone, and the silence was shocking, after that noise and confusion. Only Kettle remained, still trying to get that saddle on. Gail leaned the shotgun against a wheel, and unhobbled her wagon team where they had grazed nearby, separated from the cavvy of cowhorses.

She hitched them up, then took the shotgun, and walked to a rise in the ground. From here, she could still hear the gunfire in the timber. She could look the other way down onto the herd. The animals made a peaceful picture, many of them still getting awkwardly onto their feet from where they had bedded down, as yet untroubled by the far-off shots.

Then Gail saw a rider line away from the cattle and make for a cove in the timber. He skirted the hill upon which she stood, screened from him by buffalo brush, and she saw it was Guy Bedar. She dropped down the other side to meet him in a gully. He rounded a corner and brought his horse up in sharp surprise.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Thought Marrs might need some help," he told her.

"Did you now?" She looked with frank disbelief up at his narrow, tight face, his eyes that finally dropped before hers. She raised the shotgun. "You turn right back and ride that herd. If you try to get away, I'll use this without compunction. And if

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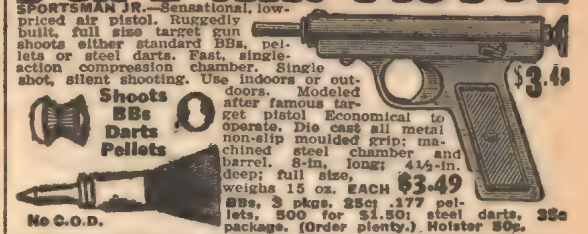

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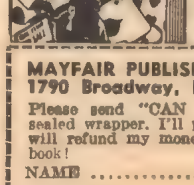

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anything happens to those cattle, I'll hold you personally responsible, and act accordingly."

He gave her a last, indecisive look, glanced at the shotgun, then wheeled and trotted back through the gully. She climbed the hill, placing herself where he could see her. Twice, he turned to look back, but didn't stop his horse till it was within a few feet of the herd again.

Renewed firing turned her attention the other way. A man in a blue army coat and striped pants came stumbling out of the trees, leading a horse. Kettle Corey turned from where he had finally managed to saddle his dancing pony, drawing his gun. But the man in striped trousers had already fallen on his face, releasing the horse. It tossed its head, whinneying, and broke in Gail's direction.

A pair of riders followed the first man, bursting from timber at full gallop. They reined in sharply when they saw Kettle. The fat man's gun racketed twice, and one of the riders pitched off his horse. The other man tried to swing his animal back into the trees, shooting wildly at Kettle. The animal stumbled and threw him.

He struggled to his hands and knees, shouting something after the fleeing animal, and then crawled the few feet into the trees. From there his gun began to go off. Kettle Corey was reluctant to let go his cowpony. He tried to pull it in behind the linchpin.

"You damn little biscuit cutter, get in behind here before I flay your hide right off your—"

His nasal voice broke off with a cry of pain, and he released the animal, running in a stumbling way to the linchpin, where he dropped into the cover of a wheel, holding his side. Gail flung a last glance at Guy Bedar, and ran down the hill toward the wagon. The man was still firing from timber, and she could see wood chipping off the box of the linchpin. When she was close enough, she stopped, and let both barrels of her shotgun go. When the deafening sound of that was over, she realized there was no more shooting from the trees.

She ran to Kettle, kneeling beside him, but he grinned up at her. "I'm all right. You'd need a howitzer to get through this tallow I pack. He just chipped a little of it off the side. Lord knows I can stand to lose some." He paused, squinting out at the body of the man he had shot off his horse. "Ever seen Harry Rickett before?"

"The man Marrs said Slaughter had sold out to," she muttered, staring at the body. "No."

"That's him," said Kettle. "Used to work for Boa Snyder down in Nueces County." He started edging from behind the wheel, and Gail cried out to him, trying to pull him back. He took her hand off. "I got something I want to see. You stay here. I think you cleaned the timber out good enough with that Greener of yours."

THE sweat bathed his fat face as he crawled to the body, holding his bloody side. He fished in Rickett's coat, pulled out something. She saw him nod in some satisfaction, and turn back this way. When he reached her, he was holding a short-barreled derringer in his hand.

"I've waited a long time to find out what that man packed," he said, settling himself with a sigh against the wheel. "It's a Slotter Derringer, Gail. Caliber .47. You don't find that calibre very often." He fished a chunk of mashed lead out of his pocket, holding it up. "This bullet killed Gary Carson down in Nueces County."

"When—" she looked out at Rickett, as the comprehension formed fully in her mind—"Lee Marrs Benton didn't murder Gary Carson?"

"Not according to this evidence," said Kettle. "And I have every conviction that he had nothing to do with the man who was tortured to death near Corpus Christi. It could have been done by any one of a thousand rustlers or murderers along the border at that time. Carson's murder was just so brutal and pointless that it formed circumstantial evidence linking Benton with the other killing, and public opinion did the rest."

"Rickett was with you, then, when you surrounded Benton in the cabin?" she asked.

Kettle nodded. "Rickett was representing the Fort Worth Cattle Company. But I found out later he had been on Boa Snyder's payroll previous to working for Fort Worth. We were all scattered around

the cabin when we trapped Benton, none of us very close to each other, and naturally took it to be Benton who shot Carson. But when I saw Carson's body, I didn't think such a long shot would make a hole that size in a man. I went back and looked around, and found this slug about halfway between timber and cabin. A derringer don't carry very far anyway, and that's just about where it would have dropped after going through Carson, if Rickett had shot from the fringe of trees."

"But why should Rickett shoot Carson?"

"If Rickett was still working for Boa, it's obvious," said Kettle. "Boa Snyder, Curt Young, half a dozen others had gotten their start mavericking. By this time they were big men, sitting fancy saddles in state and county politics. With mavericking now in the same pen as rustling, it would have caused them no end of trouble to have their past operations uncovered. Which, apparently, the Nueces County investigation was well on the way to doing. They had to divert attention quick, and Lee Marrs Benton became the goat. They were successful enough. The murder focussed so much attention on Lee Benton that the county investigation was forgotten."

"And you let them do it," she said, savagely.

He shook his gross head, smiling sadly. "I ain't no hero. With the meager evidence I had, the machine that made Benton a goat could have broke me like a matchstick if I'd so much as opened my mouth."

She studied him for a space, the savage expression fading from her face. "Why is it Lee Benton wasn't hanged?"

"Not till after Benton was in jail did Boa and Curt and the others find what a tiger they had by the tail," grinned Kettle. "Benton had mavericked with most of them in the early days, and seen what edgey operators they were. After a couple of minor doublecrosses, he figured he'd play it safe. He began to record the men he rode with, the territory they covered, the brand and earmarks put on the mavericks, and the probable outfit to which those mavericks really belonged.

"With mavericking now looked on as

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rustling, you can see what that kind of information would do to a man in politics. When Benton realized he was becoming the goat, he put this information in the hands of a lawyer, to be opened upon his death. Boa Snyder tried to locate the lawyer, but he realized what dynamite he had, and hid out. Finally Boa and his machine had to get busy and have Benton's sentence commuted to life. Apparently he got out on good behaviour."

Renewed firing from the timber turned Gail in that direction, and the words left her in a husky, bitter way. "How ironic that you should prove his innocence now when already it may be too late."

IX

COTTONWOODS raised their white branches above the scruboak, and persimmons gleamed claret in their first full light of the rising sun. It had settled down to a stalk in the timber now, between the jayhawkers and the Pickle Bar men. Pothooks Marrs had been crawling through the scarlet mallow on his belly for the last few moments, stopping now and then to try and place one of Jared Thorne's men. From ahead came a shot, then silence. He had not yet come across Solo Sam, and he was beginning to feel an insidious fear for the boy. A swish of brush off to his flank caused him to flatten out, hooking a thumb over the hammer of his old Walker. An immense red-headed, red-bearded man appeared abruptly, farther down the avenue of stunted trees, bent forward to follow someone's tracks, a Navy Colt in his hand.

Marrs was about to throw down on him when the man jumped back suddenly, taking cover behind a tree, and started firing. A sharp click came from his gun. He pulled the trigger again, with the same effect.

"Well, Senor," said Don Vargas, stepping into the open. "If I had known your gun was unloaded, I would have met you sooner. Let me show you how much better a saca tripas is. It never gets unloaded."

"I got something here to beat that," said the red-head, dropping the gun to pull a naked Bowie from his belt, and stepped out.

"Pah," spat Don Vargas, circling him for an opening. "Down in Mexico they give those to babies to play with. You haven't seen a knife till you've seen a gets-the-guts."

"Then let me see it," shouted the redhead, and jumped at him with a bestial snarl. Don Vargas dodged the overhand thrust and came in below with a typical Mexican underhand. The other man whirled violently so that his hip and back were in against the Mexican's stomach. Under any other circumstances, turning his back that much would have been a fatal, foolish maneuver. But it took him aside from that underhand thrust for just an instant, putting him within the circle of Don Varga's arms. And before the Mexican could shift, the redhead had brought his weapon down in a slash that ripped the Mexican's knife arm elbow to hand.

With a howl, Don Vargas dropped his knife, and tried to catch the redhead from behind. The man caught his bloody arm and threw him over his shoulder onto the ground. Pothooks Marrs jumped up, cocking his gun to throw down for good this time, because the redhead was springing onto Don Vargas with knife upraised for the finishing blow. But the shot came before Marrs could fire.

The redhead hovered above Don Vargas, as if suspended, then sprawled flat out on him. Don Vargas groaned with the weight, squirmed out from beneath.

"Gracias, Senor Marrs," he said

It wasn't me," said Marrs. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were Slaughter's man."

"I am my own man," said Don Vargas defensively. "And my allegiance to the Pickle Bar comes before any dubious friendship Slaughter may have offered me. If it was not you who shot . . ."

"It was me," Waco Garrett's vinegar voice finished for him. They turned to see the man lying back against a tree farther in toward a break, his smoking gun by his side. "If that didn't convince you some of the things in Texas are better than your damn greaser outfits, you better find somebody else to play nursemaid. I sure ain't going to be around the next time you try to prove Mexico's best."

They had reached him by then, and saw

the bloody mess of his belly. He grinned weakly up at Marrs.

"Slaughter let the daylight through. I had the drop on him, too. You got the ringiest bull in the pasture there, Pothooks. I never saw such sure death with a gun. I don't know how he got me first, but he did." He tried to laugh, and blood formed its mordant crimson froth on his lips, choking it off. His head lolled to one side, and his voice came out weaker and weaker, until the words trailed off. "Too bad I couldn't be in on some more of that tallow and molasses treatment of yours. It was better'n all the paregoric I ever took. Get 'em to Dodge, Pothooks, get . . . 'em . . . to . . ."

His head dropped and the eyes rolled shut and he stopped talking, and breathing, and living. Staring at the dead man, a dogged, sullen expression filled Marrs' face.

"Slaughter," he said, in a flat, dead voice, "Slaughter . . ."

"Hey, compadre," called Don Vargas, "wait for me."

BUT Marrs was already over on the sign, and he left the Mexican behind fast. He found where the horse had been pulled to a halt in a small break. That was where Slaughter had stopped to shoot Waco. Farther on was a big patch of blood, and Marrs followed this in to a thicket of silver buffalo brush. Pata Pala reared up from the dense bushes, with the click of a cocked gun, then dropped the weapon when he saw who it was.

"You hit bad?" said Marrs.

"Just my leg," said the man. "You can get Slaughter if you high tail it. I nailed his horse as he went by. He's on foot, in toward the wagons."

Marrs plunged on through the trees, passing the steaming, reeking body of Slaughter's heavy buckskin horse. There was no emotion in him now, no anger, no sense of vengeance. Even the conscious processes of his mind seemed to have narrowed to one edge of thought. He knew that whatever else Slaughter hoped to gain here, basically the man was after him. He wanted to get it over as quickly as possible. He burst from the trees into a clear-

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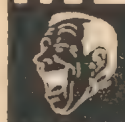

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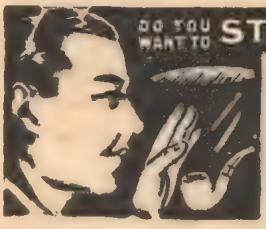

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ing and saw the immense, blond man across the way, snapping back toward him.

"Slaughter?" he shouted and fired. Slaughter completed his half turn before the shock of the bullet overcame his own initial impetus, knocking him backward. He tried to stop himself, and pull up his gun. Still running forward, Marrs fired again. The blond man made a small, grunting sound. His knees doubled up.

Crouched like that, his eyes squinted shut, he made one last effort to raise his gun. Marrs fired a third time. Slaughter's whole body jerked. Then he bent over at the waist, buckling in the knees at the same time. It looked like an accordion folding up.

Marrs was right over the body before he could stop himself. He stared down at the dead man, in a dull, thoughtless surprise that it should be over so quick. A poignant let-down swept him, causing his whole frame to tremble. Solo Sam appeared at the edge of the trees and came over to stare down at Slaughter.

"I guess they're broken up," he said, at last. "I saw about six of them heading back down the river."

"Waco nailed Jared Thorne back in the timber," said Marrs. "Pick up Pata Pala for me, will you? He's hit in the leg I'm going to the wagons."

He went at a dog-trot back through the scruboak, reloading his gun mechanically. Coming into the open, he saw Rickett lying midway between timber and the wagons. He halted a moment, and a bitter, hollow expression lined his face, as the first emotion broke through since Waco had died, flooding him with a host of old memories, the old pains and hates and agonies of ten years before. Gail and Kettle were coming from the wagons, and not until she came up close did he see the strange set expression on her face.

"What is it?" he said.

Gail looked at him without answering, and Kettle spoke for her. "Paul Butler's dead in the wagon. One of Rickett's bullet's must have gone through the sideboard."

Marrs looked sharply at Gail, lines of compassion cutting into his brow. She came into his arms and let her face touch his chest, unashamed of Kettle seeing it, speaking in a low, dead voice.

"I can't feel anything, Pothooks. Do you blame me? No sorrow or grief. No emotion of any kind. Is that wrong?"

"You know it isn't," he said. "You know no one would blame you."

"I loved him once," she said. "It's as if he died, for me, years ago, when he began to turn that way. It's as if I've done all my grieving through these last years and can't find strength for anymore."

"I understand," he said. "Don't try to feel anything. Just try to bury it all, here." She looked up quickly, as if remembering something, and he nodded. "Slaughter's dead."

She did not speak for a moment, studying his face. "I know who you are, Pothooks," she said at last, quietly.

"I figured you did, by now," he told her.

"She also knows you didn't kill Gary Carson," said Kettle, holding up the mashed slug. "This bullet nailed Carson, Pothooks, but it came from Harry Rickett's gun."

Marrs stared at him with a strange, fading expression on his face. "That's why you played cat and mouse all this time?"

"I had the bullet," grinned Kettle. "It wasn't complete proof that you were innocent, but it made me give you a little rope, Pothooks. When you pulled those cattle out at the Red River instead of drowning them for Rickett, I figured you were throwing a straight rope."

"That day we left Dallas," said Marrs, "I found a bit of red flannel in a tree in the Trinity bottoms, just after I parted with Rickett."

"That was me all right," said Kettle, with a sigh. "I was coming back from a night of revelry in Dallas, and overheard the bunch of you talking. A piece of my shirt must have ripped off when I went back to climb on my horse."

Marrs looked over Gail's shoulder at Rickett's body, again, and a dark withdrawal tightened his face. Gail reached up impulsively, touching his lips with her fingers in a maternal, reassuring way.

"I know what you're thinking, Pothooks, but—"

"Maybe you don't, Gail," he said, through stiff lips. "Revenge isn't in my mind. It never was. I'm even glad it

didn't have to be me who shot Rickett. I don't want to get Boa or Curt or any of them. In a sense, they weren't to blame, any more than I was. They started mavericking with as good faith as a thousand other Texans back from the war. They just had the sense or the luck to get out of it quicker than I did, and to hide their back trail better. I just want to be left alone, Gail, by all of them."

"Then you will be," she said. "When I married Paul, the Pickle Bar swung a bigger loop than Boa Snyder and Curt Young and all the rest of them put together. We had representatives in half a dozen cattle associations, and Paul's political connections went right up to Washington. If we get this herd through, it will put Pickle Bar on the way up there again. Snyder or Young wouldn't dare touch someone connected with us. If you drove this herd to Dodge, you'd be connected with us."

"I'll drive it to Dodge," he said quietly.

"And if you stayed on afterwards, to boss the crew . . ."

"I'll stay on as long as you want me, Gail."

Kettle chuckled, flipping the mashed .47 slug. "From what I've seen, that could very well be a lifetime agreement. And at something more than just bossing the crew."

"I hope you're right," Marrs told him.

Gail said nothing, but in her eyes, gazing up at Pothooks, was a wide, shining acceptance of him that precluded all words.

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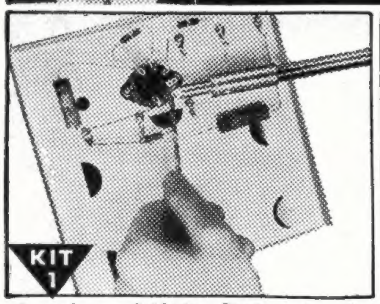

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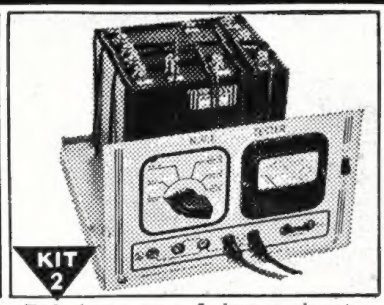

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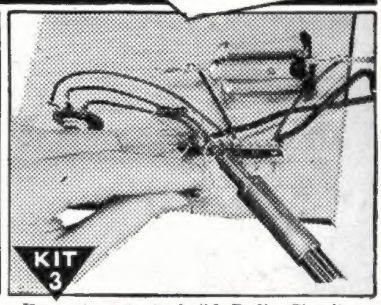

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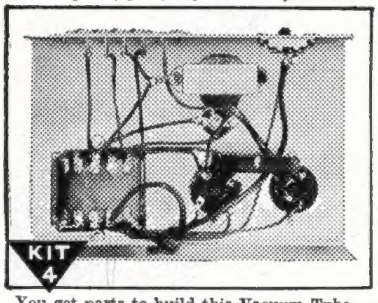

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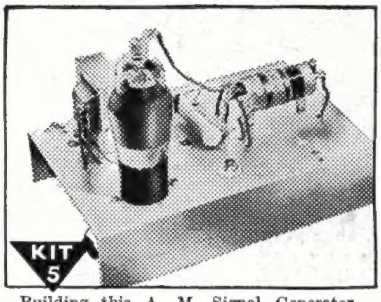

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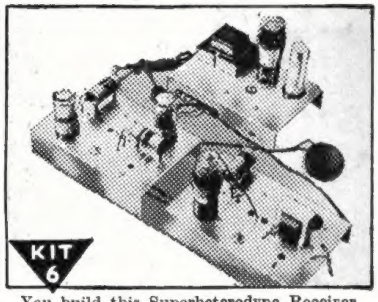

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